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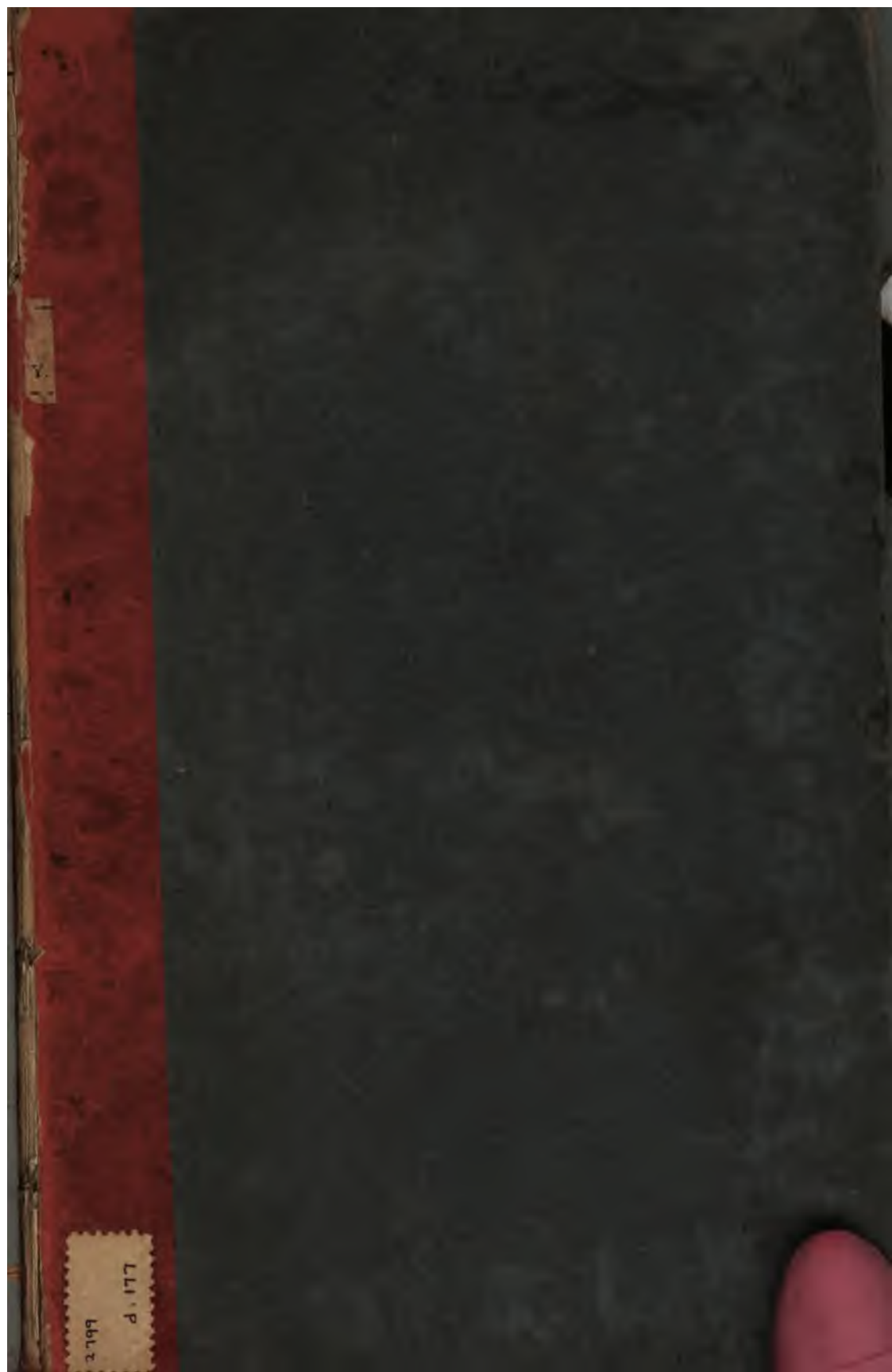
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**CRITICISM**

**ON**

**GRAY'S ELEGY**

**WRITTEN IN**

**A COUNTRY CHURCH-YARD.**

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*A. A. Ramsay*

A

# CRITICISM

ON THE

## ELEGY

WRITTEN IN A

### COUNTRY CHURCH-YARD.

BEING A CONTINUATION OF

#### DR JOHNSON'S CRITICISM

ON THE

POEMS OF GRAY.

*[Written by the late Prof. A. Ramsay  
of Glasgow Univ. 1810.]*

THE SECOND EDITION.

EDINBURGH:

PRINTED FOR JOHN BALLANTINE AND CO.; AND FOR LONGMAN,  
HURST, REES, AND ORME, LONDON.

1810.





## ADVERTISEMENT.

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To prevent mistakes, and in justice to his Readers and himself, the Editor of the following Tract feels himself bound to declare, that he has no farther concern in it, than as being accidentally the channel through which it is conveyed to the public. Having ordered, a few months ago, <sup>1</sup> Irish editions of some

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<sup>1</sup> It is with concern that the editor has learnt, that this species of traffic, so convenient for the knights companions of the light purse, is so much at present on the decline, as to threaten (in the language of the Counter) to be speedily knocked up. The Irish editors have imprudently screwed up their prices too high: and their rivals on this side the water have been, of late, unusually sharp set in running them down, by the assistance of the Statute Book, and the officers of the customs. It was a sorry sight to the editor,

late publications (an irregularity into which the high prices of town-made books, and the low state of his own finances, have sometimes betrayed him, to the detriment of copy-hold rights, and “ against the form of the statute in that case provided ;”) he found the parcel, on its arrival in his chambers, to be double-fortified with swathes of printed sheets ; resembling, in their general appearance, what is known among the

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last vacation, to see the royal warehouses at the ports opposite to the Irish coast, crowded with so many choice and famous authors, languishing in ignoble bonds, and some of them expiring, in defiance of *magna charta*, under cruel tortures. . . . Here lay Mrs C-th--ne M——y, new from the sheers and sponge,—her pure costume gothically “ *DAMASKED*,” “ her silver skin laced with her golden blood,”—pointing to her ample gashes, and pining under the denial of her *habeas corpus*. . . . There lay the redoubted Junius, his body dismembered by the axe, and his quarters at the king’s disposal,—and there the stately G-b-ns, *laniatum corpore toto*, the vehicle of his keen elocution bored through with a red-hot iron, &c. &c.

*Non, mihi si linguæ centum sint, oraque centum,  
Omnia panarum percurrere nomina possim !*

trade, by the name of imperfections. This, being quite "*selon les Regles*," excited neither curiosity nor attention ; but approaching, soon after, the parcel more nearly, for the purpose of undoing the twine, the wrappers were again forced upon his eye ; when he perceived, by certain cabilistical marks upon the margins and field, and which his printer would laugh at him should he attempt to depict that what he had taken at first for imperfections, were no other than proof-sheets, of a work apparently critical, and which he felicitated himself on his chance of feasting on, perhaps, before the public. He set himself accordingly to examine the sheets with attention ; and found them, not without some surprise, to contain a methodical criticism upon Gray's " Elegy written in a Country Church-yard ;" executed in a manner somewhat *outré*, and including observations on certain other poems of Gray,

together with allusions to certain analyses of them, preceding this particular criticism, but which were not to be found in these sheets. A sudden thought now entered his head, and one which some will perhaps think he too hastily adopted. Having been lately reading Dr Johnson's Criticism on Gray, (a work which afforded him infinite gratification,) and the doctor's manner being then strongly impressed on his mind, he fancied he perceived a resemblance betwixt the style and mode of criticism displayed in the doctor's published strictures on Gray's other poems, and that adopted in the criticism before him. The *leges judicandi* were the same ; and the editor was led to fancy it possible, that the observations on the Elegy written in a Country Church-yard, were composed by Dr Johnson, and printed off for publication, along with the other parts of the Criticism on Gray, but afterwards with-



drawn ; from the suspicion that a censure so free, of one of the most popular productions in the English language, might be ill-received by the public. Full of this idea, the editor formed the resolution of restoring to his fellow-readers what seemed to him to have been needlessly taken away ; and thus of gratifying their palates with a dish that one meets not with every day.

What his riper sentiments upon this subject are, the editor does not choose to say. The public are in possession of the evidence, both external and internal ; and they are left to judge for themselves. It is, however, but fair to admit, that there are some circumstances which appear rather unfavourable to the idea, that this Criticism on Gray's Elegy is the genuine production of Dr Johnson. Although it is not difficult to conceive, that means might have been found to

get the <sup>1</sup> proof-sheets of this work transmitted successively to Ireland (as the proof-sheets of other works have been, even in due course of post); and although the case of an <sup>2</sup> author of note, as well as of boldness, withdrawing a printed work, previous to the day of publication, is not without precedent in the annals of literature; yet the boldness of Dr Johnson is so colossal, and his just confidence in the propriety of his own taste, and the

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<sup>1</sup> The great number of proprietors (in all thirty-six "contez,") whose names, in eight files, marshalled in the form of the Cuneus, defend the title-page of Dr Johnson's amusing work, though calculated to strike terror in after pirates, may have even contributed to render easy the first trespass. Secrecy and prudence distributed among thirty-six men, amount to little else than names. "In the multitude of counsellors there is safety:" The case does not apply to copy-holders.

<sup>2</sup> It is said to be a vouched anecdote of the author of "Essays and Treatises on several subjects," that he revoked and destroyed certain essays, which he had already got printed off, and in which he found reason to suspect that he had taken his ground rather hastily.

soundness of his critical creed, so completely *inebranlable*, that one may be justified in doubting, whether it could be possible for him to bring himself to cancel, from prudence, that which he had once printed off for publication. So stands the argument on one side ; but ΠΑΝΤΙ ΛΟΓΩ ΛΟΓΟΣ ΙΣΟΣ ΑΝΤΙΚΕΙΤΑΙ,\* as the shrewd Sextus has told us.

But, whatever may be the editor's opinion with respect to the authenticity of the tract now offered to the public, he finds himself at full liberty to acknowledge, that he has more than once repented of the resolution he had formed to reprint it. He soon found that the sheets were in some places so faint and blotted, and in others so erased and torn, that it was impossible to present it for

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\* A truism respectfully recognised in this inn. "*Replication*" versus "*Plea*," "*Sur-Rebutter*" versus "*Rebutter*," &c.



publication, unless in a manuscript copy, taken with much pains, and in which it would be necessary to call in the aid of conjecture, toward completing the sense by supplement and interpolation. Difficult as this appeared in prospect, he found it still more difficult in execution : but, though he was often tempted to abandon his enterprise, a perseverance almost whimsical at last bore him through the labour he had undertaken. How he has acquitted himself in it, it belongs not to him to say. He may have committed mistakes ; but he has committed none that he possessed the means of avoiding. In the case of one or two *proper names*, he is not sure that he may not have supplied the defaced characters incorrectly.

From what has been now stated, this tract must necessarily be supposed to meet the public eye, in a state somewhat different from that in which it came from the pen of its supposed author. The

characteristic peculiarities of the writer, and that poignancy which distinguishes all his productions, must naturally be found in it, in a disguised and flattened state ; and the strictures must have lost, of course, “ part of what Temple would call their *race* ; a word which, applied to wines, in its primitive sense, means the flavour of the soil.”<sup>1</sup>

It was once intended to print the Criticism in a manner resembling the editions of Festus, which distinguish, by a difference of character, the unimpaired passages in the *original*, from the supplements and interpolations. But technical reasons were adduced against this mode ; to which the editor was obliged to yield, as he possessed not science sufficient to refute them. In place of this contrivance he had substituted another, which would have equally gratified the curi-

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson.—*Life of Pope*.

osity of the lovers of the imitative arts, for whose entertainment this publication was meant. In imitation of Mr Brooke Boothby,<sup>1</sup> he meant to have deposited the original in the British Museum, for the inspection of the curious. But, alas ! the late dreadful conflagration, which extended itself, in part, to his chambers, deprived him of the power of executing what he had planned. The zeal and activity of friends, which saved all his valuable property, overlooked these dirty sheets. The editor soon after saw their remains. They had died a gentle death. The flame seemed just to have reached them at the time its violence was spent ; for they lay, undissipated, in a drawer half open, and which was little more than singed. The characters were in part legible, being marked in a pale white, spreading over a livid ground ; at once

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See Preface to " ROUSSEAU JUGE DE JEAN JAQUES."

furnishing a proof of identity, and claiming a joint appropriation of the character which the poet had applied exclusively to man :

“ Even in our ashes live their wonted fires.”

*Lincoln's Inn, 15th Jan. 1783.*



# ELEGY

WRITTEN IN A

COUNTRY CHURCH-YARD.

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## I.

THE curfew tolls the knell of parting day,  
The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea;  
The plowman homeward plods his weary way,  
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

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\* — *The knell of parting day,]*

— Squilla di lontano,  
Che paia 'lgiorno pianger, che si muore.  
DANTE, *Purgat. l. 8.*

## II.

Now fades the glimmering landscape on the  
sight,  
And all the air a solemn stillness holds ;  
Save where the beetle wheels his drony flight,  
And drowsy tinklings lull the distant folds ;

## III.

Save that, from yonder ivy-mantled tower,  
The moping owl does to the moon complain  
Of such, as, wand'ring near her secret bower,  
Molest her ancient, solitary reign.

## IV.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's  
shade,  
Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap,  
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,  
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.

## V.

The breezy call of incense-breathing morn,  
The swallow twittering from the straw-built shed,  
The cock's shrill clarion, and the echoing horn,  
No more shall rouse them from their lowly bed.

## VI.

For them no more the blazing hearth shall  
burn,  
Or busy housewife ply her evening care ;  
No children run to lisp their sire's return,  
Or climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

## VII.

Oft did the harvest to their sickle yield ;  
Their furrow oft the stubborn glebe has broke :  
How jocund did they drive their team afield !  
How bow'd the woods beneath their sturdy  
stroke !

## VIII.

Let not Ambition mock their useful toil,  
Their homely joys, and destiny obscure ;  
Nor Grandeur hear, with a disdainful smile,  
The short and simple annals of the poor.

## IX.

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,  
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,  
Await alike th' inevitable hour :  
The path of glory leads but to the grave.



## X.

Nor you, ye proud, impute to these the fault,  
If mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise ;  
Where, through the long-drawn aisle and fret-  
ted vault,  
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

## XI.

Can storied urn, or animated bust,  
Back to its mansion call the fleeting breath ?  
Can honour's voice provoke the silent dust ?  
Or flattery sooth the dull cold ear of death ?

## XII.

Perhaps, in this neglected spot, is laid  
Some heart once pregnant with celestial fire ;  
Hands that the rod of empire might have  
sway'd,  
Or wak'd to ecstasy the living lyre.

## XIII.

But knowledge to their eyes her ample page,  
Rich with the spoils of time, did ne'er unroll ;  
Chill penury repress'd their noble rage,  
And froze the genial current of the soul !

XIV.

Full many a gem of purest ray serene  
The dark unfathom'd caves of ocean bear;  
Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,  
And waste its sweetness on the desert air.

XV.

Some village Hampden that, with dauntless  
breast,  
The little tyrant of his fields withstood;  
Some mute inglorious Milton here may rest;  
Some Cromwell, guiltless of his country's blood.

XVI.

Th' applause of list'ning senates to command,  
The threats of pain and ruin to despise,  
To scatter plenty o'er a smiling land,  
And read their history in a nation's eyes,

XVII.

Their lot forbad: nor circumscrib'd alone  
Their growing virtues, but their crimes con-  
fined:  
Forbad to wade through slaughter to a throne,  
And shut the gates of mercy on mankind;

## XVIII.

The struggling pangs of conscious truth to hide,  
To quench the blushes of ingenuous shame,  
Or heap the shrine of luxury and pride,  
With incense kindled at the muse's flame.

## XIX.

Far from the madding crowd's ignoble strife,  
Their sober wishes never learn'd to stray :  
Along the cool sequester'd vale of life  
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

## XX.

Yet even these bones from insult to protect,  
Some frail memorial still erected nigh,  
With uncouth rhymes and shapeless sculpture  
deck'd,  
Implores the passing tribute of a sigh.

## XXI.

Their name, their years, spelt by th' unletter'd  
muse,  
The place of fame and elegy supply ;  
And many a holy text around she strews,  
That teach the rustic moralist to die.

## XXII.

For who, to dumb forgetfulness a prey,  
 This pleasing anxious being e'er resign'd,  
 Left the warm precincts of the cheerful day,  
 Nor cast one longing, lingering look behind ?

## XXIII.

On some fond breast the parting soul relies,  
 Some pious drops the closing eye requires :  
 Even from the grave the voice of nature cries ;  
 Even in our ashes live their wonted fires.\*

## XXIV.

For thee, who, mindful of th' unhonour'd  
 dead,  
 Do'st in these lines their artless tale relate ;  
 If, chance, by lonely contemplation led,  
 Some kindred spirit shall enquire thy fate ;

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\* *Even in our ashes live their wonted fires.*]

Ch'i veggio nel pensier, dolce mio fuoco,  
 Fredda una lingua, et due begli occhi chiusi,  
 Rimaner dopo noi pien di faville.

PETR. Son. 169.

## XXV.

Haply, some hoary-headed swain may say,  
" Oft have we seen him at the peep of dawn,  
" Brushing with hasty steps the dews away,  
" To meet the sun upon the upland lawn.

## XXVI.

" There, at the foot of yonder nodding beech,  
" That wreathes its old fantastic roots so high,  
" His listless length at noontide would he  
    stretch,  
" And pore upon the brook that babbles by.

## XXVII.

" Hard by yon wood, now smiling as in scorn,  
" Mutt'ring his wayward fancies, he would rove;  
" Now drooping, woeful, wan, like one forlorn,  
" Or craz'd with care, or cross'd in hopeless  
    love.

## XXVIII.

" One morn I miss'd him on the custom'd hill,  
" Along the heath, and near his favourite tree:  
" Another came; nor yet beside the rill,  
" Nor up the lawn, nor at the wood was he.

## XXIX.

"The next, with dirges due, in sad array,  
"Slow through the church-way path we saw  
"him borne.  
"Approach and read (for thou can'st read) the  
lay,  
"Grav'd on his stone beneath yon aged thorn."

## THE EPITAPH.

## XXX.

HERE rests his head upon the lap of earth,  
A youth to fortune, and to fame unknown:  
Fair science frown'd not on his humble birth;  
And melancholy mark'd him for her own.

## XXXI.

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere;  
Heav'n did a recompence as largely send:  
He gave to misery all he had,—a tear;  
He gain'd from Heav'n ('twas all he wish'd) a  
Friend.

## XXXII.

No farther seek his merits to disclose,  
Or draw his frailties from their dread abode,  
(There they alike in trembling hope repose,)<sup>a</sup>  
The bosom of his Father, and his God.

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<sup>a</sup> (*There they alike in trembling hope repose.*)]

—— paventosa speme.

PETR. Son. 114.



## CRITICISM, &amp;c.

My process has brought me at last to the far-famed "Elegy written in a Country Church-yard." Of this Elegy, caution seems to dictate, that censure should say but little, where praise has said so much. Even obstinacy is content to admit it to be possessed of the presumptive claim to commendation, which is derived from popularity. Literary history furnishes not many instances, where the anxieties of authors have been fully removed, before the public was in possession of their work. Yet such was the case in the instance before us. The favourable opi-



nion of the world, with respect to this poem, was ascertained whilst it was yet in the birth ; and attention was roused by repeated whispers, about a noble elegiac production, circulating among a few confidential friends, and of whose author it was said (in the cant usual on such occasions) that the diffidence withheld it from the public eye. In such situations there are never wanting encouragers, to cocker and spirit up the modest author ; who yields at last to importunity, and the dread of a mutilated and surreptitious publication. It is, however, but fair to confess, that, on this occasion, the solicitations of Gray's friends were not merely complimentary. The recital of certain brilliant stanzas had secured approbation to the whole. Praise in this instance preceded publication, as in some other instances he found it follow far behind ; and Gray felt himself in a situa-

tion singular among authors ; not soliciting public favour, but solicited to accept it.

The “ Elegy written in a Country Church-yard ” has become a staple in English poetry. It is even beginning to get into years. Of those that now frequent the haunts of them that make verses, or that judge of them, the greater part remember not the time when it was not recited with approbation : and, when a few laggards, who witnessed its first introduction, and heard now and then a tone of dissent interrupting the notes of admiration, shall have “ fretted their hour,” and gone away, the custom of praising it will be entitled to the denomination of a good custom, which, in criticism as well as law, holds of *prescription* ; being “ That whereof the memory of man runneth not to the contrary.”

Though the curiosity of the public had done nothing to push forward this Elegy,

sagacity might easily have foreseen its success. Meditation upon death is, and ever has been, the occasional business, or pastime, of mankind ; and, though, like devotion, it cannot admit of the sublimer flights of poetry, yet, when the mind has fairly clung to the subject, with its sensibilities awakened, and their expressions within call, nothing that is thus produced will be totally void of interest. The views, if not striking from novelty, will be commanding from seriousness : and even mediocrity in the sentiment will be a passport to general correspondence.

The delusion too under which Gray laboured, that his character was a pensive one, and which, though not permanent, was periodical, seems to have lent its aid towards fitting him for compositions of this kind. The frequent recurrence of any propensity leads, by sure steps, to the final adjustment of the cha-



racter; and even when the propensity is ideal, the repetition of the fits will, in the end, invest fancy with the habitudes of nature. Whatever part self-deception or affectation may have originally had in the matter, Gray became, at length, *bona fide*, a melancholy man. The features of his mind plied gradually to the cast of the mould his imagination had formed for it. Of the language of the feeling he became possessed of a competent portion, as well as of its modes, to which, on several occasions, he gave expression; and on none more remarkably, than in composing the Elegy under consideration.

If, in establishing the fortune of literary productions, popularity established also their worth, criticism would find herself rid of one of the most unpleasing, as well as unprofitable, of her tasks. But this is not the case. The maxim "*Vox Populi, &c.*" taken in its full range, is

not more destructive to good government, than hurtful to sound criticism. To examine the Elegy written in a Country Church-yard, so as to rest its merits upon firm ground, its popularity should be kept out of view. Of such an examination the object is not to discover what has been said, but what may be said justly. Criticism acts not in the character of Recorder, but of Judge. It is not her business to ENGROSS decisions, but to DICTATE them.

Of this Elegy I find little in the "General Design," either to praise or to blame. It differs in nothing material from the general design of all Meditations on Death, from Boyle to Hervey inclusive. The subject has the advantage of being interesting, but the disadvantage of being common. The reader attends to it from motives of duty as well as of interest. So does also the writer; though he soon finds that piety confers not poetic in-

spiration, and that sublimity is not the necessary offspring of a serious frame. The paucity of the topics precludes circumvagatation; and the innovelty of the views represses effusion. The subject is already as great as it can be made: and of decoration the execution would be difficult, and the experiment attended with danger.

Of the "Particular Plan," criticism withholds the censure, until she shall have ascertained the conception. Perhaps the author had no particular plan at all. A number of different views of the subject, all of them serious, most of them common, and many of them interesting, are collected from different quarters, and thrown together in that inconsecutive train, in which men meditate, when they meditate for themselves. "*Ibi hæc incondita solus.*" Like Virgil's Corydon (who is deprived of our sympathy from the baseness of his passion, as the poet



is of his praise, from degrading his soliloquy into a pastoral) the Meditator in the Country Church-yard is supposed to touch on the different topics as they arise to his mind, not prescribing the law of succession, but receiving it.

Of poets who had wrought on the subject before him, either incidentally or from purpose, he seems to have followed no one completely as a model, but to have gathered occasionally from all. Parnell's "*Night-Piece*" seems to have been most in his eye: though of Parnell the scheme is, in much, different from that of Gray. From Milton's "*Penseroso*" too he has taken several hints; and, what may appear surprising, some even from his "*Allegro*." From Thomson and Collins he has been furnished with many images; and some thoughts are borrowed from Pope. Materials, brought together from so many different quarters, may be expected to form an heterogeneous whole.

Adherence is not solidity: and we look not for rigorous unity in *cento*.

Of the "versification" I delay the strict examination, until my process shall have brought me to the particular passages that suggest it. Only, in general, it may be doubted, whether the Quatrain, with alternate rhymes, has that connection with the Elegiac strain that many poets and some critics have conceived. Dryden, who was eminent in both characters, is so clearly of opinion that it is the most magnificent of English measures, that one is apt to wonder how it should have first been thought of as a vehicle for a species of poetry, of which the character is gentleness and tenuity. It is the stanza adopted by Hammond. But the credit of Hammond's poetry was not of magnitude sufficient to give a classical stamp to any kind of versification. Mr Mason thought more favourably of his friend's authority; and, by



his advice, Gray was prevailed on to use the quatrain, that the merit and eminence of this poem might secure to elegy the exclusive and undisturbed possession of that measure.

Such was the idea of Mr Mason, of whose sagacity in foreseeing events, the reader, from his success in this, may form no unfavourable idea. Yet of this measure it may be said with truth, that it brings with it no momentous accession to the powers of English versification. It possesses all the imperfections of blank verse, acquired with all the labour of rhyme. The coincidences of terminating sound, by being alternate, admit of an interruption by which they are either lost, or found at the expence of a labour greater than the gratification they bring: and the stanza, by being limited to a certain definite compass, either forces the poet to end his thought abruptly, or to eke it out with supplemental and exple-

tive matter, always weakening expression, and rarely concealing distress. It is somewhat surprising that blank verse, improper in almost all other subjects, should not have been generally thought of as a vehicle for that species of excursive thinking which prevails so much in the elegiac strain. Young has used it with success in his great work, which, in diffusion and desultoriness, approaches to the nature of the Elegy.

Criticism never feels herself more keenly affected, under the sense of humiliation, than when she is laid under the necessity of extending her strictures to margins and title-pages. Yet circumstances will, at times, occur, to make such degradation indispensable. Of the poem now under consideration, the title might have escaped censure, had it not been originally different from what it now is; and had not the author persuaded himself to suppose, that, when he altered it, he mend-

ed it of course. It is seldom that the change of a title is a happy change. If it has had a seat in the imagination previous to the operation of composing, or even during its progress, it has considerably influenced the execution. It has so led and regulated the train of thinking, and the mutual dependencies, that the slightest after-deviation from it is in danger of creating inconsistency. It introduces a species of confusion and inconsequence, like that which was introduced into the *Dunciad*, when Pope, at the instigation of Warburton,<sup>1</sup> changed the hero of that piece; and which, the poet and his Mentor, who kept botching it during the whole of their lives,<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Bowyer.—It is to be hoped that the executors of this gentleman will take some method of preventing from perishing the much curious information which his profession and industry enabled him to collect.

<sup>2</sup> Pope did not long survive the change. In the private corrections of Warburton, I find little that can create re-



were not able to remove; though the labour of Procrustes was doubled, and both the tortured and instruments of torture were racked to produce accommodation.

Gray has more than once been unfortunate in his fancy of changing his titles. He had composed an Ode, to which he gave the title of "*Noon-Tide*." Falling out of humour with this title afterwards, for what reason does not appear, he<sup>1</sup> new-named it an "*Ode on Spring*." Noon-tide, however, was in his imagination, when he wrote it; and it is an Ode on Noon-tide still.

"Reflections in a Country Church-yard" was <sup>2</sup> the title by which this piece was first known; a title plain, sober, and expressive of its nature; but too undig-

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gret for that precaution of the poet, which prevented them from being made public.

<sup>1</sup> Mason.

<sup>2</sup> Mason.

nified in the apprehension of its author, who persuaded himself to think "Elegy" a finer name. He should, however, have considered that, in adopting the new title, he subjected himself to severer rules of criticism than before; and shut himself out from many pleas, in defence or palliation of its desultory style, which would have been open to him from its old title of "Reflections;"—a title in which, little unity being promised, there was little right to expect it. Being completely put together too, before the change of title took place, and being suffered, after the change, to remain in a great measure as before, it became charged with incongruities too obvious to escape observation. Though an Elegy may be written in a church-yard, as well as in a closet, and in a country church-yard even better than in a town one; yet courtesy itself must pronounce it fantastical, if an Elegy *is to be* written, to

choose out a place for writing it, where the conveniences for that operation are wanting, and where even the common implements either exist not at all, or exist by premeditation. Who is there that says, or would be endured to say, "I will take me pen, ink, and paper, and get me out into a church-yard, and there write me an Elegy; for *I do well to be melancholy?*" Parnell has carried the matter far enough, when he resolves to get out into a church-yard, and think melancholy thoughts.

If the writers of studied seriousness, and recorders of premeditated griefs, would employ one half of the time spent in preparing their sadnesses for the public eye, in examining into the propriety of introducing them to the public at all, the journals of poetry would be less disgraced than they are with the balance of affectation against nature. The seriousness, which closes upon



the soul, is not the offspring of volition, but of instinct. It is not a purpose, but a frame. The sorrow, that is sorrow indeed, asks for no prompting. It comes without a call. It courts not admiration. It presses not on the general eye; but hastens under covert, and wails its desolation alone. Its strong-hold is the heart. There it remains, close curtained; unseeing; unseen. Delicacy and taste recoil at the publications of internal griefs. They profane the hallowedness of secret sadness; and suppose selected and decorated expression compatible with the prostration of the soul.

Not only are they indelicate, and out of nature: they are also imprudent. Sadness is a transient feeling. The violence of its effusions produces its expenditure, as the agitation of fluids promotes their evaporation. Of its first unreasonableness, when the expression is only oral, little harm is done; for the language is



perishable as the feeling: but "*Litera scripta manet*;"—and, when the man whom "melancholy had marked for her own" is found, in violation of his vow, "tripping on light fantastic toe," or the inconsolable husband, who was to cherish no second flame, consents to comfort himself in one spouse for the loss of another, they find the public in possession of their written wailings, and not a little out of temper with them, that they have not kept their word. Of the first Lord Littleton, there are many simple men of feeling who have scarcely brought themselves to believe, even on the authority of the Register, that, after the death of his Lucy, he married a second wife. Enough of this.

To the incongruities already specified, may be added another in this Elegy, invested as it is with its present title; and that other yet more flagrant. Gray had originally laid his Meditation, at a time

with which the idea of the operation of writing was incompatible. The "parting day;" the "glimmering landscape fading on the sight;" the "plowman returning home, and leaving the world to darkness;" are images consistent with the situation of a thinking muser, but irreconcilable with the process of writing, or even scrawling. Yet, by a friend of Gray, a serious, and not unintelligent person, who has put together verses himself, and to whom I communicated this observation, have I been called upon to take notice, that the author has described himself, in the Elegy, as carrying on his musing *by moon-light*!

\* \* \* \* \*

## L. II. III.

Of this Elegy the three first quatrains present what may be termed the preparation. To the serious exercise that is to take place, it is necessary, that the *senses* be first properly *got under*; or, at least, that such work be cut out for them, as may prevent them from embroiling the train of pensive thought. With propriety then has the author made them the objects of his first care. With propriety too, are *hearing* and *sight* selected; as the most restive, and unfriendly to meditation, and, of course, requiring management the most. Gray has pushed this matter a point farther. Not contented with their neutrality, he has proceeded to court their assistance; and held out to them such "*guerdons fair*," as might win them not only not to obstruct me-



dition, but to act as auxiliaries in promoting it.

When these guerdons are brought forward in exposure ; for the *ear* we have " the sound of the curfew ;" " the lowing of the herds, returning to their stalls ;" " the tinkling (I suppose) of wether-bells ;" " the droning of the beetle ;" and " the screeching of the owl ;" sounds not improper, when taken singly, but destructive, when taken in the total, to that *solemn stillness* which is spoken of. We are tempted to think of Hogarth's " enraged Musician," whose rapture is destroyed by an agglomeration of sounds, each of which, taken separately, might have been, by an effort of patience, endured.

For the *eye* we are presented with " the slow winding off of the cattle ;" " the plodding pace of the returning plowman ;" " the fading of the landscape ;" and " the moon, discovering, by her light,

a tower mantled with ivy." Of these images, criticism is content to admit the propriety, whilst she denies their originality, reserving to herself the right of stricture, on the plan according to which they are assembled, and the style in which they are drawn.

If the images above recited are traced to the poets from whom they are taken, we shall not always perceive them to have found their way into the Elegy written in a Country Church-yard, in an *improved* state. Of the curfew, as heard by a man of meditation, we have the following circumstantiation in Milton's "*Penseroso* :"

Oft, on a plat of rising ground,  
I hear the *far-off* curfew sound ;  
Over some wide-water'd shore,  
Swinging slow with sullen roar.

To this characteristical figuring, Gray has thought proper to substitute the conceit of *Dante* ; according to which the cur-

few is made to toll *requiems* to the day newly deceased: a fancy more subtle than solid, and to which the judgment, if reconciled at all, is reconciled by effort.

Of evening the approach is described in the Elegy, as a prose-muser would have described it: "The glimmering landscape fades on the sight;" let us hear Thomson:

A faint erroneous ray,  
Glanc'd from th' imperfect surfaces of things,  
Flings *half an image* on the straining eye;  
While wavering woods, and villages, and streams,  
And rocks—are, all, one swimming scene,  
Uncertain if beheld.<sup>1</sup>

Or, more compressed in the thought, and invested with the sweetness of rhyme;

But chief, when evening shades decay,  
And *the faint landscape swims away*,  
Thine is the *doubtful soft decline*,  
And that best hour of musing thine.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Summer.

<sup>2</sup> Ode to Solitude.



## And Collins :

Be mine the hut that views

—Hamlets brown, and dim-discover'd spires,

And hears their simple bell, and marks, o'er all,

Thy dewy fingers draw

The gradual dusky veil.<sup>1</sup>

The idea of making *sounds* of a certain kind give a *relief* (to speak in the language of artists) to *silence*, is not new. Thus wrote Collins in 1746 :

Now air is hush'd, save where the weak-ey'd bat,

With short shrill shriek, flits by on leathern wing ;

Or, where the beetle winds

His small, but sullen horn.<sup>2</sup>

The beetle of Collins and Gray is the “*grey fly*” of Milton, that, in the pensive man's ear, “winds his *sultry* horn.” Collins has changed the epithet into *sullen*, by a happy *misremembrance*.

In Parnell, in place of “ivy mantling

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<sup>1</sup> Ode to Evening.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.



a tower," we have "yew bathing a charnel-house with dew." The ivy and the tower might stand any where as well as in a church-yard; but the charnel-house is characteristic, and the yew is funereal. Of Parnell's image, however, candour must acknowledge the strength to be so great as to render it almost offensive.

In Gray, the introduction of the owl is proper. Parnell's ravens might have found another place to croak in than a church-yard, and another time than night. But the *part* the owl acts in the Elegy is impertinent, as well as foolish; and exhibits an example of a writer spoiling a good image, by *piecing* it. On some fine evening, Gray had seen the moon shining on a tower such as is here described. An owl might be peeping out from the ivy with which it was clad: Of the observer, the station might be such, that the owl, now emerged from the "mantling," presented itself to his eye in profile, skirt-

ing the moon's limb. All this is well. The perspective is rather striking: and the picture not ill defined. But the poet was not content. He felt a desire to enlarge: and, in executing his purpose, produced accumulation without improvement. The idea of the owl's *complaining* is an artificial one; and the view on which it proceeds absurd. Gray should have seen, that it but ill befitted the *bird of wisdom* to complain to the moon of an intrusion, which the moon could no more help than herself.

I suspect this idea, of the owl complaining to the moon, to have been a borrowed one, though I do not certainly know from whom. Addison, whose piety deterred him from doubting that religion was capable of poetic embellishment, has made the moon tell a story, and the stars and planets sing a devotional catch.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Spectator, N<sup>o</sup> 465.

But of fancies approaching to Gray's, I find no one that approaches so closely, as that contained in the children's book, where the little dog is drawn *barking at the moon*. It is expostulation in the one case, and scolding in the other. Gray has chosen the most respectful. But enough of this. Criticism is content to check a curiosity that wants an adequate object, and would spare Poetry the mortification of finding herself tracked to the lanes and blind allies where her trappings were picked up.

Though the complaint of the owl is unreasonable, her distress is characteristic, and prettily expressed; yet "bower" is rather a gay term for an owl's eyry; and of the application of "reign," where there are none to reign over, the propriety admits of doubt.

A few words more on the *expression*, in these three stanzas. "Leaves the world to darkness and to me," is quaint,



and puts us in mind of "great Anna,"  
who

Does sometimes *counsel* take, and sometimes *tea* :<sup>1</sup>

but quaintness is what every reader comes prepared to meet with in Gray. It is one of the most marked features in his poetical character, and sometimes extends to his prose.\* "I am come," (says he, in one of his letters to his friend) "to *town*, and *better hopes of seeing you*." "How *little* are the *Great*," was the closing line of a stanza in that ode,<sup>3</sup> in which it is said, that "they that creep and they that fly, shall *end* where they *began*:" and so he suffered it for some time to stand, in application, no doubt, of his own idea of a closing thought, which ought, as he expresses himself,<sup>4</sup> "to have a flower stuck

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<sup>1</sup> Pope.

<sup>2</sup> Mason's Collections.

<sup>3</sup> Ode on Spring.

<sup>4</sup> Mason.

in it," or "to be twirled off into an apophthegm." The flower, however, in time, ceased to please him : yet, with so faltering a hand did he pluck it out, and so awkwardly did he re-adjust the parts that remained, that, as his Editor observes, the change was for the worse, and the thought lost its original poignancy.\*

When I am told that "all the air a solemn stillness holds," I hesitate ; and in vain, by the help of the Grammar, or Collocation, endeavour to discover which of the two is the holder, and which is the held. If it is the air that holds the stillness, too great liberty is taken with the verb ; and if it is the stillness that holds the air, the action is too violent for so quiet a personage : but the sound was necessary, to assist the bell-wedders to complete the lulling of the " folds."

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\* Mason.

Having cleared the way in the preceding stanzas, he now enters upon his ground, and lays out his Church-yard in form. Here Criticism is posed, unable to answer the question, "What is the most proper church-yard?" Whether there be a taste in church-yards; and a selection of capabilities required in this, as well as in other modifications of terrene surface, I am uncertain. Nor do I know that Kent, or the other English architects, ever laid out a church-yard; though it appears that the Scotch, who are eager to make the most of every thing, have taken even that into their general plan of pleasure ground.<sup>1</sup> Gray's Church-yard has been designed: But the fancy of Cipriani, wedded to the softness of Bartolozzi, has not been able to produce from it any thing that makes

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<sup>1</sup> Called by them Policy.



a decisive appeal to any strong feeling of the heart.

Neither of Parnell, nor of Gray, does the Church-yard contain any thing that any church-yard might not contain. Of Parnell, the Church-yard and its environs are thus presented to the reader's view : " In distant prospect, a lake :  
" resting on its bosom, the moon, sur-  
" rounded by stars, having for ground a  
" sky deep azure : on the right, rising  
" grounds, "*retiring in dimness from the*  
" *sight :*" on the left, the Church-yard ;  
" or (as he, in imitation of the Hebrew  
" simplicity, calls it) the *place of graves*,  
" surrounded by a wall, which is laved  
" by a silent stream : a steeple, belong-  
" ing, no doubt, to the church : a char-  
" nel-house, over-canopied with yew :  
" graves, with their turf osier-bound :  
" other graves, with smooth flat stones  
" inscribed : and others still, splendidly  
" done out with marble, &c."



Gray's Church-yard is thus connected with its adjuncts, and presented to the reader's eye: "In near prospect, a vil-  
"lage: herds and labourers returning  
"home: glimmering landscape: tower  
"ivy-mantled, surmounted by an owl,  
"in profile and perspective, skirting the  
"moon: rugged elms: shady yew: an  
"old thorn; and the surface swelling  
"here and there with common graves.  
"Hard by is a wood, a nodding beech,  
"and a brook running over pebbles."

Of the two designs, taken in a general view, that of Parnell seems the more perfect. The assemblage takes in every thing that a church-yard should contain; and a gradation of graves is introduced, with due attention to the distinction of ranks, which is not lost even in a church-yard. In this respect, Gray's Church-yard is imperfect; and the imperfection has deprived his meditation of some of its interest. It has, besides,

no charnel-house. In other respects, it is much as it should be ; which, at best, is but a negative merit. The absence of blemish is not perfection : and of that officer, small will be the claim to praise, who, complying with the rule of the service, comes out to mount guard in his regimentals.

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#### IV.

Of inaccuracy in the formation of the thought, the fourth quatrain furnishes some examples. It is more according to truth, as well as convenience, to suppose a church-yard *hedged round* with trees, than *planted* with them. A church-yard is not a thicket. A human body buried at the foot of a large tree, with strong spreading roots, is more consonant to poetry than to practice. It is not true,

that, in an ordinary assemblage of graves, the "turf heaves in mouldering heaps." If the ground heaves, no doubt the turf will heave with it: but the "heaps," if they are "*mouldering* heaps," must heave *through* the turf, not the turf *in* them. "Rude forefathers of the hamlet," is equivocal. The forefathers of a hamlet should mean other, more ancient, hamlets. But of hamlets there are no genealogies. Among them no degrees of consanguinity are reckoned.

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## V. VI.

The two following stanzas contain a paraphrase of the two last lines of the preceding; viz.

"Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,

"The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep;"—

and, of this paraphrase, it may be grant-



ed that the language is pleasing ; yet of the circumstances brought into view, there is no pointed and respective application to the different orders of dead that are specified. Though the sleepers are subjected to classification, and distinguished into four sets, reapers, tillers, team-drivers, and wood-cutters ; and, though the rousers to morning labour are also enumerated as four ; yet the departments are not set off distinctly, nor are the sounds that are to rouse characteristically appropriated to each. Neither the “ twittering of the swallow,” nor the “ clarion of the cock,” have reference to one set of sleepers more than to another : and the “ echoing horn” seems to have nothing to do with any of them. What is meant by the “ breezy call of incense-breathing morn,” as an help to early rising, is not very plain ; though this is one of the lines that it

is thought creditable to apprehend and feel.

Thomson, indeed, has asked the following question :

Falsely luxurious, will not man arise,  
And, springing from the bed of sloth, enjoy  
The *cool*, the *fragrant*, and the silent hour ? †

But the motive contained in this expostulation is not physical, but moral ; it is directed to those that are already awake, but who, from laziness, “ continue a-bed, when they should be stirring about.”

“ Twitter,” applied to the swallow, is one of those words whose measure and articulation are supposed to resemble what they denote. Gray found it in Dryden ; and, as Thomson had done before him, took it on trust. But what

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† Summer.



shall we say of the “*clarion* of the cock?” It is, no doubt, allowed to poetry to exalt the little, by comparing it to the great; but, *Sunt certi fines*. To swell out an insignificant little being, by an accumulation of glaring trappings, and to compare his shrill diminutive pipe to a bold instrument of martial music, is to subject the animal as well as the description, to ridicule.—*Incredulus odi*.

When Cupid, in an Ode of Anacreon, gives the name of “winged dragon” to a bee, and calls the puncture received from his sting a “mortal wound,” the levity of the piece, as well as the design, reconciles us to the hyperbole. In making his grey fly “wind a horn,” Milton has gone fully as far as he ought. It is not enough for the justification of Gray, that his offence is not greater than Milton’s;—that “clarion” is not more to the cock, than “horn” is to the beetle. The

justness of poetical description has nothing to do with the doctrine of *ratios*. Hamlet's advice concerning chaste playing, applies equally to chaste description. There may be an "outstepping the modesty of nature" in both.

If "straw-built shed" be meant as descriptive of a swallow's nest, it is an affected expression, and adopted in defiance of observation. A shed is a roof or covering: the roof or covering has, in the case of a swallow's nest, nothing necessarily to do with straw; nor is it built by the swallow at all.

In the sixth stanza, it is assumed, that "the blazing hearth burns;" although it is obvious, that the hearth neither blazes nor burns; but the fire *upon* the hearth. But more than this might be forgiven to the picture of domestic happiness which the stanza holds out, and which is drawn with great interest, and much simplicity.

Thomson had said, in a case somewhat similar,

In vain for him th' officious wife prepares  
The fire fair blazing, and the vestment warm ;  
In vain his little children, peeping out  
Into the mingling storm, demand their sire,  
With tears of artless innocence.—Alas !  
Nor wife, nor children, more shall he behold ;  
Nor friends ; nor sacred home.<sup>2</sup>

Here are the same images. The blazing fire ; the busy wife, plying her evening care ; and the children, anxious for the return of their father, by both affectedly denominated *sire*.—They occur also in nearly the same order. The image of the children, however, Gray has improved by the addition of a tender stroke, not in the original :

Nor climb his knees the envied kiss to share.

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<sup>2</sup> Winter.

## VII. VIII.

In the seventh quatrain, is contained the discriminated catalogue of the dead, already alluded to; and, in the eighth, the *caveat* to Grandeur and Ambition. Of this latter stanza, however, the last two lines serve little other purpose than to complete the number to four. The idea was already fully in our possession. "Grandeur" is but "Ambition" in his Sunday's clothes. Ambition's "mockery," and Grandeur's "disdainful smile," are the same: and the "short, but simple annals of the poor," are their "useful toil; homely joys; and obscure destiny." But this is a fault chargeable on Gray, throughout the whole Elegy. In every description we recognize the rhetorician; studiously presenting his object in a multitude of different aspects; and creating



an artificial increase of dimension, by a minute and tedious enumeration.

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## IX.

In the three first lines of the ninth stanza is inculcated a serious truth, by way of check to the sneers of grandeur and ambition. But *Beauty* is forced awkwardly into the company of these scoffers. As she was no accomplice in their mockery, she is unjustly, as well as unpolitely, involved in their mortification. Of the third line the expression is faulty, because it is obscure. The signification of the word "await," is not yet very pointedly ascertained. Whether does the hour of death await pomp and beauty? or do they await it? Both modes of phraseology have examples in our language.

" Even as the wretch, condemn'd to lose his life;  
" Awaits the falling of the murderous knife,"—

is said by Fairfax. But the other is the more generally received usage. We rather accustom ourselves to say, that " the evil awaits the sufferer ;" than that " the sufferer awaits the evil." According to this view, it should be *awaits*. But, as by this means the nominative and the verb would change places in the syntax, and the arrangement be awkward to an English ear ; in several editions, and particularly in Mr Mason's, it has been printed " await." There is a difficulty both ways. When, in the use of any expression, an author finds himself thus troubled and beset, he ought to abandon it altogether, and substitute one of more undisputed capability.

The stanza concludes with a conceit. It is not true, that " the path of glory leads *but* to the grave." Nor is it *because* it is the path of glory that it leads thither

at all. Parnell's thought, with less conceit, has in it more of interest, and much more of piety.

" Death's but a path that must be trod,  
" If man would ever pass to God."

In a series of stanzas that follow, the author sets himself to expostulate with the proud ; and undertakes to prove the absurdity of the contempt which he supposes them ready to pour on the " unhonoured dead," for their want of more superb monuments, from a regular succession of *common places* :

1. It was no "*fault*" of theirs that they had not such monuments.
2. They would have stood them in little stead, had they had them.
3. Worth and Genius may have existed without them.
4. It was the injustice of fortune that made them want them.
5. The account was balanced for them another way.

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<sup>1</sup> Night-Piece.

—all which topics are handled with tolerable plausibility, and at decent length.

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## X.

It is in the tenth stanza, that this train of thought commences. But the introduction is not clear of incumbrance. "Impute not to these the fault," is an affected and inadequate expression for "don't treat them with scorn." The two last lines are the most majestic in the whole Elegy. But they contain an appeal to feelings, which none but those who are so happy as to have been bred up in a veneration for the solemn forms and service of the National Church, can expect to possess. The palate of a secretary, accustomed to the reception of



slender foods, will nauseate the full meal  
set before him in these lines ;

Where, through the long-drawn aisle, and fretted vault,  
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

Of this last line, however, criticism must remark, that either the composition of the thought is faulty, or the arrangement of the expression is inverted. It is not the anthem that swells the note, but the agglomeration of notes that swells the anthem. I am content to suppose this to have been his meaning ; communicated in a mode of arrangement, unpleasing to an English reader in his own language, but of which he admits the propriety in Latin compositions. I have seen this line most correctly transferred into that language in many different modes, all of them meritorious, in a selection from Exercises written by the Boys of the first form in Merchant Taylor's School, and sent to me, with a view, of

which I will not gratify my vanity with the publication ; though justice requires that of the worthy master I should solace the labours, by recording the unwearied diligence, and by bearing testimony to those abilities that are sedulously exerted in forming the rising hopes of another age.

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## XI.

Fault has already been found with Gray for conforming to the affected use of participles in place of adjectives. "Honied spring ;" madding crowd, &c." "Storied urn," is of the same family, and even more exceptionable, because liable to misapprehension. The *intended* meaning of the epithet is, "having stories figured upon it." In the Pense-

at all. Parnell's thought, with less conceit, has in it more of interest, and much more of piety.

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Addison has done in the following couplet :

I *bridle* in my struggling muse with pain,  
That longs to *launch* into a nobler strain.<sup>1</sup>

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#### XIV.

Of the melancholy truth, that great parts are often kept from expansion, by the influence of poverty and ignorance, the fourteenth stanza seems to promise the illustration, by reference made to analogous depressions of excellence in the material and vegetable kingdoms. But more is promised than performed. The examples are made up of shewy images ; but they are not examples in point. *Non erat his locus.*

The proposition to be illustrated was,  
“ That latent possibilities of perfection,  
“ which favourable situations an cir-

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Italy

“ cumstances might have *brought out*,  
“ are, sometimes, by circumstances of an  
“ untowardly kind, prevented from be-  
“ ing duly unfolded.” Of this position  
illustrations might easily have been found,  
had not Gray confounded it with ano-  
ther, equally true, yet altogether distinct.  
That other position is, “ That, of per-  
“ fections *already unfolded*, there may  
“ occur extrinsic causes to prevent the  
“ beneficial display.”

It is of this latter position, that Gray  
has given the illustration, in the images  
of “ the *gem*, whose brightness is hid by  
“ its depth in the sea;” and of “ the  
“ *flower*, whose beauty and fragrance are  
“ lost, on account of the solitude of the  
“ desert in which it grows.” It is no-  
thing to the illustration of the *former*  
position, that the flower blushes un-  
seen; or that the gem may grow where  
no hand can reach it. Had the bright-

ness of the gem remained folded up in the *crust*; or the flower been frost-nipt in the *bud*, the images had been in point.

Of the images themselves I have already allowed the merit. They are both, however, to be found in Thomson, from whom Gray seems to have borrowed more than he thought fit to acknowledge. Speaking of the influence of the sun, and the universal operation of light; he says,<sup>1</sup> in the way of address to the great operator,

The unfruitful rock itself, impregn'd by thee,  
*In dark retirement* forms the lucid stone.  
The lively diamond drinks thy *purest rays*;  
Collected light compact.

And, describing the retirement of a rural beauty,<sup>2</sup>

As, in the hollow breast of Apennine,  
Beneath the shelter of encircling hills,

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<sup>1</sup> Summer.

<sup>2</sup> Autumn.

A myrtle rises, *far from human eye,*  
And breathes its balmy fragrance o'er the wild ;  
So flourish'd, blooming, and unseen by all,  
The sweet Lavinia.

In the *former* example, the "diamond" of Thomson becomes the "gem" of Gray. Both are *formed in retirement* ; though Gray has changed the place ; and transplanted the diamond into the sea, for causes that do not appear, and with a propriety of which criticism entertains a doubt. Both stones are of "purest ray."

Of the *latter* image, the identity is still more obvious ; although it has been disguised by the change of a myrtle into a flower ; and, perhaps, by a shifting of the scene from Italy to Arabia Deserta. Why a flower was thought more eligible than a myrtle, or a desert more proper than a *shelter'd* waste, for rearing a tender plant, we are not informed. To see the sense of justice return, is pleasant, even when the return is *late*. Gray, to-



wards the end of his life, dived for the gem; and, having brought it up, replanted it in the earth, to be "raised," (not disloyally I hope) to grace a diadem. To the myrtle he made also signal amends, for its long transformation into a flower, by a *supplicat*, through the chancellor of his university, to have it raised from its metamorphosis to the dignity of the mitre.

Thy liberal heart, thy judging eye,  
The *flower* unheeded shall descry,  
And bid it round Heaven's altar shed  
The fragrance of its blushing head;  
Shall raise from earth the latent *gem*,  
To glitter on the diadem.\*

Thomson's myrtle "breathes its balmy fragrance o'er the wild;" Gray's flower "wastes its sweetness on the desert air." "Wastes," in place of "breathes," is an improvement; though, whether *one* air

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\* Installation Ode.

is more "desert" than *another*, the authority of Shakespeare himself will not hinder us to doubt.

It is often highly entertaining to trace imitation. To detect the adopted image, the copied design, the transferred sentiment, the appropriated phrase, and even the acquired manner and frame, under the disguises that mutilation, combination, and accommodation, may have thrown around them, must require both parts and diligence; but it will bring with it no ordinary gratification. A book, professedly on the "History and Progress of Imitation in Poetry," written by a man of perspicacity, and an adept in the art of discerning likenesses, even when minute; with examples properly selected, and gradations duly marked; would make an important accession to the store of human literature, and furnish rational curiosity with a high regale.

I remember to have once heard, I know not where, or from whom, that Swift had projected a work of this kind. But Swift was full of projects; and scarcely possessed steadiness or industry sufficient to carry such a design through. I should have had better hopes of its success in the hands of Addison than of Swift. But I return to Gray.

To the *expression* in some parts of this stanza, certain objections have been proposed. The word "bear," is thought to be improperly used, and to have been produced by the exigencies of the rhyme: the caves of ocean "*supporting* the precious stones that are formed there," is said to be an idea inept and insignificant. To this it has been urged in reply, that "bear," in this passage, means "produce" in analogy to vegetable birth. But I am not sure that the analogy is not rather to animal production. Thus Waller, in a similar case, speaking of the sea ;

—— 'tis so rockless and so clear,  
That the rich bottom does appear  
Paved all with precious things, not torn  
From shipwreck'd vessels, *but there born.*<sup>1</sup>

And of the application of "born," also, to the flower, which "blushes unseen," the same may be the account. It is not metaphysically used, to denote necessity or fate; but physically, to denote production. The use of "born" for "destined," is too proverbial for poetry.

"Purest ray serene," has been censured by some as obscure, and by others as redundant. But that an expression, which seems to have been studiously sought, should have had no meaning in the mind of its author, it is scarcely reasonable to suppose. Gray, in the maturer part of his life, addicted himself to the study of natural history. It is not

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<sup>1</sup> Loving at First Sight.



impossible that, in some of the writers he had read on these subjects, he had found "ray serene;" (*raggio sereno*;) used, as a technical term, for what, in precious stones, is commonly called the water.

"Purest ray," taken by itself, is the expression of Thomson; who afterwards calls it "collected light compact," according to a mode, not uncommon with him, of thrusting in his noun betwixt two shouldering epithets; in the use of which mode, he and his fellow imitators were, as I have heard Savage humorously observe, *kept in countenance* by Milton's "human face divine."<sup>1</sup>

Of this stanza, before I conclude the examination, I am willing to gratify the reader with a communication on the sub-

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<sup>1</sup> Paradise Lost, Book iii.

ject, made to me by the late Dr Calvert Blake, a gentleman of eminent taste, and most extensive acquaintance with the body of English poetry; and who, by the cabals of trusted malignity, was driven from high hopes of merited preferment; and forced, though a series of accumulating misfortunes (of the greatest part of which, as he informed me, he had a regular presentiment,) to seek refuge in the mountains of Wales, where he taught the private school founded by the benefaction of the late Colonel Perkins, till death put an end to his distress.

It was the opinion of Dr Blake, that Gray was drawn into this expression incidentally, by the instinctive operation of his ear, presenting him with indistinct and faint renewals of sounds, which he had treasured up mechanically, and without purpose of recal. Thomson had said, "purest ray," and Milton, with an ar-

rangement very like the present, "so thick a drop serene;"<sup>\*</sup> and from the two together was formed by Gray his "purest ray serene." Thus far Dr Blake. Whether his conjecture be well founded, I do not here mean to inquire. The coincidence of rhythm and form is remarkable. "Drop serene," is a translation of "gutta serena," a technical expression for a disease of the eyes, proceeding from an inspissation of humours, and terminating in the loss of sight. Of the application of the term *serene*, to a case where there is a total shutting out of light, Physic may be left, at her own leisure, to give her own account.

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<sup>\*</sup> Paradise Lost, Book iii.

## XV.

Of the fifteenth stanza I find little to praise, either in the poetry or politics : for politics it does contain ; although it is part of a meditation on death. Gray had passed his youth like most young men, who are taught, or teach themselves, to consider something peculiarly respectable as associated with the character of *Whig*. Of the ebullitions of his uninformed youth, he was unfortunate enough to reserve considerable part for the plague of his riper age. Of his whiggish prejudices his poetry is full.

That whiggism is the best *poetical* side of the question, candour is content to allow. If it seldom puts much money in the poet's purse, or brings with it much quiet to his mind, it is useful to him in



the way of his profession ; and, when he works himself up to faction, he may be said to "labour in his vocation." Of Liberty, the idea is so vague, and the dimension so little settled, that the poet may make of it what he will. The fairy land is all his own ; and, however fantastic his combinations may be, he will not want fantastic hearers to listen to his tale.

He may transform his mortal into a "goddess," at will. He may chuse out for her what proportions, and invest her with what attributes he chuses. He may array her in robes that are "heavenly bright." He may describe her as offering "bliss" with "profusion," and ready to be delivered of "delight : " "Pleasure," crowned, walking with her, arm in arm ; and "Plenty," drest in smiles, bearing up her train behind ; whilst she scatters her gifts on every side ; giving to na-

ture gaiety, to the sun beauty, and to the day pleasure.\* When he has thus finished off his goddess, he may think of introducing her into company ; and, whatever be the fate of her gentleman usher, the *goddess* is sure of being well received by those that know the value of such a visitant.

Whatever may in general be urged or admitted, on the one side or the other, concerning Liberty, criticism must be allowed, with pertinacity, to maintain, that the political creed of Thomas Gray had nothing to do in the Elegy written in a Country Church-yard. Not only is this insertion out of place ; it is also ill-timed. The zealots of rebellion are no longer heroes in Britain ; and the appeal to the admiration of the reader, is tossed back in the author's face. Other times have

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\* Addison. Letter from Italy.

brought with them other principles. *Tempora mutantur, et nos*—. The subtle distinctions, and inflammatory reasonings, that countenanced the shedding of sanctified blood, are no longer allowed a hearing. Even the whiggish Addison has declared such reasonings to be *profanation*; pronouncing, almost a century ago, and of his own favoured Milton, that

— Now the language can't support the cause.<sup>2</sup>

Of distinguished models of human excellence, of characters high-finished, both in understanding and heart, there is no want, either in the general history of mankind, or in the particular history of this island; and astonishment cannot help doubling her usual portion of wonder, that, from among the assembled worthies of the world, Gray could find

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<sup>2</sup> Account of the greatest English Poets.



none deserving selection, as patterns of greatness to man, save three desperate partizans of faction, and promoters of a rebellion, that subverted both the laws and government of his country.

Of these three characters, only one is held up to any censure. Even on him the censure is made to fall obliquely, and, after it has had its force broken by a whiggish arm. The censure itself too is of whiggish make. Of Cromwell, the crime is declared to have been the shedding his *country's* blood. For his *king's*, Gray returns "*ignoramus*" on the bill.

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#### XVI.

In the sixteenth stanza is contained more, in the way of allusion to these heroes and their transactions ; but allusion, at which criticism finds herself obliged



to stop short. Though the evil temper of the times *did* enable them to "command the applause of listening senates," which is poetical language, for being *well heard in the house*; yet, with what propriety, can any of them be said to have "scattered plenty o'er a smiling land?" Of a land that has its plough-share turned into a sword, the plenty is not great: nor was England drest in smiles in the time of the great rebellion.

In this stanza too, Gray is guilty of an inconsistency. "To despise the threats of pain and ruin," is not of the class of virtues that the poor man's lot forbids, even according to the views of Gray. On his "village Hampden," notwithstanding the meanness of his lot, he forgets that, in the former stanza, he conferred a *dauntless breast*, in all the forms of investiture. But the disgrace of this inconsistency is due to him; for having, on an occasion like this, suffered his mind

to be bewildered with politics. It is a great blot upon the piece. Of a work, such as this, the sentiments ought to be such as every heart will return; the appeals, such as every mind will admit. Death generalizes the specifications of political tenets. The grave takes in all parties. There is no Shibboleth among her subjects.

The "reading their history in a nation's eyes" is a thought that holds more of rhetoric than poetry. "History" is too indefinite a term. There is good history, and there is bad. It is no exclusive privilege of *good* men to be able to read their history thus. The *bad* come in for their share. Nor do the *rich* enjoy here any power of appropriation, which extends not also to the *poor*, in degree. The expression is a forced one. We commonly read the histories of *others*: seldom *our own*.

## XVII. XVIII.

Of the two following stanzas, the composition is faulty in respect to their connection with the preceding, and with each other. Even where the composition is in couplets, the fastidious critic is unwilling that the sense should be made out by the couplets' bearing in upon each other. When the stanza exceeds two lines in number, the effect is yet more disagreeable. The plea of necessity is urged with less reason ; and the contrast betwixt the completed circumscription of sound, and the yet uncompleted accumulation of sense, becomes more revolting, as it becomes more felt.

With this blemish, the stanzas under consideration are chargeable. Gray was not unaware of it ; and, that it might be less perceptible as a blemish, he gave

orders, in the first edition, that no distinction of stanzas should be marked.<sup>\*</sup> In a Scotch edition, however, of his Poems, which he seems to have thought likely to extend his fame, the natural distinction of stanzas is restored, as it is in many others, particularly in Mr Mason's. The device was but a shallow one, and very properly relinquished. In verse of this alternate structure, the lines form themselves into quaternions: and the bringing out these quaternions separately to the eye, is only a technical contrivance, enabling us to parcel them more readily. Instead of attempting to conceal the fault, Gray should have tried to mend it.

In the *sense* I find little to blame, that may not be referred to some of the former strictures on this Elegy. "Virtues,"

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<sup>1</sup> Mason.

and "Crimes" are ideas too particular for the author's view in this place, which is meant to extend to the circumscription, from causes extrinsic, of the range of natural, as well as moral, action. . "Hiding the struggling pangs of conscious truth," and "quenching the blushes of ingenuous shame," are only different descriptions of the same action, viz. the "checking the dictates of Conscience." "Quenching blushes," is an idea scarcely correct; though, by the quenching of *heat*, blushes may be made to disappear. That the poor man's lot forbids the bearing down the suggestions of conscience, is only *relatively* true. Profligacy is free of all corporations.

## XIX.

In the nineteenth stanza is described, in a manner that is pleasing, the calm and contented state of an unaspiring and meek mind. But what description can there be, in which such a picture will not please? The two first lines are, from the arrangement, equivocal: but we know what the author ought to mean. It is not, that "their wishes never strayed far from the strife of the crowd;" but that, "naturally retired from that strife, they formed no wish to stray from such retirement." Yet the words "crowd," and "ignoble," are not happily selected, to be brought forward in a description of the contentions of the "mighty," and the "great." The two closing lines have



in them something of softness, that makes criticism deal censure with reluctance :

Along the cool, sequestered vale of life,  
They kept the noiseless tenor of their way.

Yet, even here, the idea, as usual, is presented to us in different aspects. Ambition is painted as a *hot*, and then as a *noisy*, personage ; and to these views of his character are opposed the “ cool vale,” and the “ noiseless tenor,” that are thought fit to be associated with the character of the man of content. Gray never could be brought to see when he had said enough.



XX. XXI. XXII. XXIII.

The four stanzas that follow, are to me the most pleasing in the Elegy. The no-

tions appear to memory, original; though to belief and feeling, imitations. But, great as is their general merit, in some particulars they are faulty. The sacredness of the critic's trust, imposes on him sometimes the exertion of self-denial; obliging him to range for blemishes, where his wishes are to find nought but beauties.

In the first of the four, the expression "these bones," where only persons had been spoken of, is awkward. "Their bones," would have been less exceptionable. To "protect from insult," is prosaic; and, if the end of the "memorial" was this protection, there is no necessity that we be put in mind, by the suggestion of the frailness of that memorial, that the end will not be answered. A memorial, protecting from insult, is a mode of expression approaching to nonsense. If protection be ever the result of its erection, it is only in a secondary way.

The twenty-first stanza does not set out happily. "Their name," "their years:" whose name? whose years? they were bones, not persons, that were last mentioned: and a nomenclature of bones, followed with the age of each, engraved over their respective repositories, is too ludicrous a fancy to be allowed sanction in the judgment for a moment. Of the meaning there is no doubt; but of that meaning, the expression is unlucky. In all compositions that are serious, the remotest temptation to what is ludicrous should be resisted. Of this idea, Gray himself seems to have felt the truth, and has alluded to it forcibly in his short strictures on <sup>1</sup> Sterne's Sermons. "They are just," says he, "what sermons should be: but the preacher often totters on the verge of risibility, and seems ready

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<sup>1</sup> Mason.

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In the *sense* I find little to blame, that may not be referred to some of the former strictures on this Elegy. "Virtues,"

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\* Mason.



The "strewing of the holy texts," too, is graphical.

That some schooling is necessary to induce resignation to death, in general position, is just; though not requiring the quantity of dilatation he has given it in the two following stanzas. Of the word "moralist," the application is incorrect, and provincial. A moralist is "one who teaches the duties of life." It is the unlettered Muse that is the moralist, not the rustic; who only takes the lesson which his teacher offers to give. Should we even stretch the compass of the word, so as to make it comprehend both the teacher and the taught, the term would be still improper in this place. The lessons are not in morality, but religion. They are not arguments, but authorities. I do not know that the verse would have suffered much, either in strength or beau-

ty, had the author's piety persuaded him to present it thus ;

That teach the rustic Christian how to die:

Gray had too much devotion about him to be ashamed of the term Christian. His observations on Lord Shaftesbury's character and writings show that he was, himself, a Christian, although a polite man ; and that he had sense enough to see, and spirit enough to despise, the duplicity and cowardice of him, who rears up morality as a mole, which he may make use of in battering revelation.

Should Criticism be asked, what blemish she has discovered in the two stanzas that follow ; " For who to dumb forgetfulness, &c." she has this general objection to propose against them, that they are too diffusive. The thought has been already stated. Of that thought they are meant to be illustrative. But

the illustration is too long. Of correct writing, it is one of the essential laws not to swell out the comment so as to become more momentous than the text. The accessories are proper in their own place ; but to overlay the principal, they should never be allowed.

What the first of these two stanzas chiefly holds out for censure, is its expression. It is not clear in what view "forgetfulness" is pronounced "dumb." That what is not remembered will, of course, not be uttered, is a truth ; but of denominatives the selection is better made, by reference to the internal nature of the object, than to circumstances only consequential. "Warm precincts" has been censured ; and "precincts of day." Yet "*luminis oras*" is said by Virgil ; and "*aridos fines Libyæ*" by more writers than I can name. "Precinct" is synonymous with "*ora*" and "*fines* ;" and signifies not the "outline" only, but al-



so the "enclosed space." In this last sense, with the accent differently placed, it is used by Milton :

Through all restraint broke loose, he wings his way  
Not far off heaven, in the precincts of light,  
Directly towards the new-created world.

That Gray, moving, himself, in the precincts of light, and within the pale of an university, claiming to herself a monopoly of that, and other sciences, should have so far unlearned the philosophy of light, as to suppose that the man who is placed in a region where light exists not, may take up the objects of sight, is matter of some surprise. He that has already left the precincts of day, will cast no "lingering look," either behind or before : he has no look to cast. Visibility and illumination reciprocate ; and, from a place to which

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<sup>1</sup> Paradise Lost, iii. 87.



the rays from the object extend not, the object is not seen.

Of "longing lingering look," the construction, in respect to sound, is in his usual style. "High-born Hoel's harp." "Light Llewellyn's lay." What is acquired to the description by the three *l*'s in "longing lingering look," it is not easy to see. But criticism is willing to check the severity of censure for a fault, which critics have in a great measure caused. The lax and solemn dictates that have passed from mouth to mouth, upon the subject of *Representative poetry*, from the days of Homer to those of his translator Pope, have misled men of greater taste and judgment than Gray. On this occasion, however, he seems to have forgot his accidence; and mistaken what his masters taught. Liquids, according

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<sup>1</sup> "Soft," not "light," is the epithet, as it stands in Gray.  
—Editor.

to the doctrines of the representative school, are imitative of accelerated motion. Of these doctrines, in the present case, he has made but a froward application, when he marshals his liquids as representative of the motion of the lag-gard passengers that hang back in their way to death.

Of all the elementary constituents of oral articulate sound, there is no one which has had more attention paid to it by the adepts in representative composition, than the semi-vocal incomposite *l*. It is easy of access, ready to grant, or even proffer, its services; and ever within call. To it, of all the rest, Gray seems to have paid peculiar court. The kindness of Dr Curzon, late of Brazen Nose, now residing in Italy for his health, and to whom I embrace this opportunity of recording my obligation for materials that have been of use to me in the present work, has put me in possession of a

little relic of Gray, furnishing a striking illustration of his fondness for this letter, and how much, as the Doctor terms it, it had insensibly gained his ear. Of this relic I do not know that, in any edition of Gray's works, the communication has yet been indulged to the public; not even in that one, in which the author's literary correspondence, and fragments of projected poems, have been printed. I am contented, therefore, to give it to the world, with part of the letter to the Doctor, in which it was inserted, as particularly connected with the present subject, and as illustrative, moreover, of that leading feature in the character of Gray, the love of project; hoping, that I may do so without offence; as, in offering this gratification to rational literary curiosity, for which I have the Doctor's permission, I invade no property, nor violate any known right.



Of this piece the subject, when mentioned, will convince those that write for the information of mankind at large, what danger attends the enunciation of universal propositions; and how much credit with the public those have risked, who have taken upon them to maintain with pertinacity, that, at no period of his poetical life, Gray ever wrote verses on love. It is a little piece, somewhat of the *Namby Pamby* kind; wrought up in the manner of a song, and composed (if one may judge, from internal marks, of writings whose dates are purposely concealed) at the particular time of his life at which his enthusiasm for Italian poetry, and Italian music, raged most. He calls it a POETICAL RONDEAU; a title which probably he would have altered afterwards, had he thought the piece worth avowing. Of the nature of the project (for so he modestly enough calls it,) together with the view which gave



rise to it, he gives the following account ; at once tending to shew it to be somewhat singular, and proving the folly of him who, in this aged state of literary communication, shall say to himself, "Go to ; I shall sit down, and write me something new."

" I have often wondered," says he, " that the analogies of these sister arts " (he had been speaking of Poetry and " Music) have not been more keenly traced out, and marked, with a view to " mutual transference. Each has many " things in her budget, which she might " give out occasionally in loan to the " other, without inconvenience to herself. Music, for instance, who is the " more sprightly of the two, and more- " over the younger and handsomer—(but " let that be under the rose,)—having had " a great many different lovers, some of " them far-travelled, and very *ton-ish*, " of course, has picked up, during the

“time they have danced after her, a  
“world of little curiosities and trinkets,  
“as well as things of more serious use,  
“in the way of dress, ornament, &c.  
“with all which she occasionally tricks  
“herself off, and makes, in them, I as-  
“sure you, a charming sweet figure;  
“she has also had, now and then, a  
“pensive lover: but from them she has  
“borrowed little else than serious man-  
“ner; which she very quickly puts off  
“again, lest, as she says, it spoil her flow  
“of spirits. So much for Miss Music.  
“Now for her sister; with whom, you  
“must know, I am a little acquainted.  
“She again is of a more steady deport-  
“ment; keeps her looks very well; has  
“no aversion to a frolic, now and then;  
“but, take notice, it must be with those  
“she is well acquainted with; for she  
“is more reserved than her sister, and  
“sets up more on sense than sprightli-

“ness. She, too, has had some lovers ;  
“though she does not give them much  
“encouragement, considering them, in  
“general, as dangles, yet, of the few  
“whom she esteemed, and thought she  
“could trust, she has not disdained, now  
“and then, to accept something in the  
“way of remembrance, and even to wear  
“it, occasionally, for their sake. Now,  
“what I would have these two ladies do  
“is this. I would have each of them  
“empty her drawers, and band-boxes,  
“throw all the things together, and turn  
“the two wardrobes into one. By this  
“means, as I told them, the things of  
“each would, in effect, be doubled ; for  
“the world is not to know. To this  
“scheme the younger, who thought it a  
“fine frolic, very readily agreed. The  
“elder has asked time to think of it ;  
“and, in the mean time, has got, at my  
“instigation, a milliner engaged to look

“ over her sister's things, and see which  
“ will fit her best. By particular desire  
“ also of your humble servant, (nay don't  
“ look wise, for ‘pon ’onnor,’ there is  
“ nothing between us) she is to make  
“ her first experiment to-morrow, and  
“ come down to tea in a trim airy dress  
“ of her sister's, which I always liked on  
“ Miss Music, and which, I pledged my  
“ taste, would become her too.

“ *Quo te Mæri pedes?* you say---Well,  
“ as you have been civil, and have put  
“ up your MAEVI in your pocket, which  
“ I grant you might have flung at me,  
“ though, mark, the quantity would have  
“ been out of *measure*---I say, as you have  
“ dealt by me like a civil gentleman, I  
“ am going to come down from my  
“ flights, and tell you shortly what I  
“ mean. *Summa sequar fastigia rerum.*  
“ A long and unintermitted enthusiasm  
“ for music has, you know, led, *volventi-*  
“ *bus annis*, to the discovery of many



“ varied modes of musical expression,  
“ and introduced multiplied mediums  
“ of musical pleasure. There are many  
“ of these which, I think, might be  
“ transferred to the sister art, Poetry,  
“ with success. The enclosed, which  
“ you, no doubt, read before the letter,  
“ and I hope have done me the honour  
“ to pronounce the serious effusion of a  
“ *non-erubescend* flame---(by the way, the  
“ word is not yet English, I believe,\*)--con-  
“ tains an Essay Piece on the principle of  
“ this scheme. The same is entitled a Po-  
“ ETICAL RONDEAU. Nay, do not stare.  
“ Be sure the stranger prove no old ac-  
“ quaintance, before you thrust him from  
“ your chambers, and shut the door in  
“ his face. You know the principle

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\* There *is* as yet no such English word. The word *non-descript*, lately introduced, upon a similar analogy, is not much less ridiculous.

“ of the *Rondeau* in Music. It is ‘ to  
 “ give a subject ease by the familiarity  
 “ arising from repetition, and interest by  
 “ diversification.’ What is known, al-  
 “ ternates with what is unknown. They  
 “ mutually lead in each other: and give  
 “ to each other a mutual relief.’ The  
 “ little trifle I sent you enclosed, is an  
 “ attempt at this alternation, in Poetry.  
 “ Accordingly, when you have first duly

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<sup>1</sup> Yielding to the suggestion of him, to whose civility I owe the letter, I submitted this passage of it to the consideration of a person, whom the doctor, with more of compliment than correctness, designates “ a *Professor* of the art of Music.” The decision of this person is before me. It runs thus: “ The Idea of the *Rondeau* in music is tolerably correct. The perfection of the *effect* will be greatest “ when the *last bar* of the DEPARTURE, and the *first bar* “ of the SUBJECT, in Return, *identify* in TONE, but *diversify* in ACCENT; the common note, or series, rising from “ a *soft* to an *enforced* intonation, in gradual progression, “ till the ear has hold of the Return as already commenced.”—There may perhaps be found those who will understand the meaning, and reconcile themselves to the diction, of this award.

“ armed yourself with your double con-  
 “ caves, you shall see, in the piece be-  
 “ fore you, first of all, come in, as in Mu-  
 “ sic--the Subject ; which is *afterwards*  
 “ to come in, as the Return. This sub-  
 “ ject you shall see to be taken from the  
 “ department of Love ; viz. “ the pain  
 “ of parting ;” which subject, Beattie, if  
 “ you find him in the humour, will pour  
 “ away to you, with his usual sensibili-  
 “ ty *mutatis mutandis*, in the charac-  
 “ ter of Polly Peachum.\* Well then, the  
 “ subject drawing to a close, you shall  
 “ see us nick the time, and prepare the  
 “ last cadence, so as to lead in what  
 “ seems to be a new subject, but is no-  
 “ thing but a modification of the old ;--  
 “ this is the first departure ; which must  
 “ be so managed as to preserve, at the  
 “ close of it, a ready lead in to the re-

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\* Beggar's Opera. “ Oh what pain it is to part,” &c.

“ turn,—which now makes its appear-  
“ ance again,—shews away a little,—and  
“ then---leads off to the second depar-  
“ ture. This must be, at once, a diver-  
“ sification of the subject, and of the first  
“ departure ;—it may contain a more la-  
“ boured air, and greater changes of key ;  
“ or, &c.—we must not, however, keep  
“ long upon it : for lo ! cometh the Re-  
“ turn anew ;---then, lead we off to the  
“ third departure, with a very learned  
“ modulation, plying in so, at the end,  
“ however, as to admit the Return, a  
“ fourth time. Now for the great trial  
“ of skill, in leading off to the last de-  
“ parture, which is to be a MINORE ; and  
“ must, if it is to be worth a farthing,  
“ be connected, at the expence of some  
“ pains, with the closing cadence of the  
“ Return that precedes it. Then warble  
“ away at the minore itself ; which must  
“ repay the favour, and make way, cour-



“ teously, for the said Return ; which Re-  
“ turn now comes in, once more, to claim  
“ on her first occupancy, and remain.  
“ mistress of the premises. Thus far  
“ Theory,---now enter Practice.”

## POETICAL RONDEAU.

First to love,—and then to part,—  
 Long to seek a mutual heart,—  
 Late to find it,—and, again,  
 Leave, and lose it—oh ! the pain !  
     Some have loved, and loved (they say)  
     'Till they loved their love away ;  
     Then have *left* ; to love anew :  
     But, I wot, they loved not *true* !

*True* to love,—and then to part,—  
 Long to seek a mutual heart,—  
 Late to find it,—and, again,  
 Leave, and lose it—oh ! the pain !  
     Some have loved, to pass the time ;  
     And have loved their love in Rhyme :  
     Loath'd the love ; and loath'd the song :  
     But their love could not be *strong* !

*Strong* to love,—and then to part,—  
 Long to seek a mutual heart,—  
 Late to find it,—and, again,  
 Leave and lose it—oh ! the pain !  
     Some have just but felt the flame,  
     Lightly lambent o'er their frame,—  
     Light to them the parting knell :  
     For, too sure, they loved not *well* !

*Well* to love,—and then to part,—  
 Long to seek a mutual heart,—  
 Late to find it,—and, again,  
 Leave, and lose it—oh ! the pain !  
     But, when once the potent dart,  
     Cent'ring, rivets heart to heart,  
     'Tis to tear the closing wound,  
     Then to sever what is *bound*.

*Bound*, to love,—and then to part,—  
 Long to seek a mutual heart,—  
 Late to find it,—and, again,  
 Leave, and lose it—oh ! the pain ! . . .

“ *Nous voilà*---and now for my friend  
 “ Bentley, to do me off nicely the de-

“ vice ; being *two* faithful hearts, that  
“ shall appear both *two* and *one* ; so  
“ closely seem they hasped together with  
“ a true love dart : the *barb* holding fast  
“ the one, and the ‘ grey goose wing that  
“ is thereon’ the other. ‘ Take notice,  
“ though---the *other* is the *female* heart :  
“ take notice of the *emblem*, too. It is  
“ only kept on by the *feather*. A light  
“ puff will make it slip off.”

Thus far the letter, and its illustration.  
To him who is not an adept in any art,  
it is a matter of difficulty to ascertain  
whether he has apprehended aright the  
import of the technical terms and phrases  
used in the language of that art. But, if  
I have attained a proper conception of  
what is aimed at in the *levity* now in-  
serted, the idea itself is not so novel, as  
the manner of stating it seems to make  
it. Of the ancient Dithyrambick Odes,  
whose chief excellence seems to have  
been their obscurity and affectation,  
(qualities in which they might find ma-

ny of the modern lyrical compositions qualified to vie with them,) a particular species were denominated *Cyclic*, or *circular*. These circular odes probably proceeded on the principle of Gray's *Poetical Rondeau*;\* as did also certain of the more sprightly and convivial songs, or glees; such, for example, as that one of *Anacreon*, of which the return-verse is

‘Οτ’ ἔγω πτω τον δινον,—

\* The person designated above, pronounces, in relation to the application of the principle of the *Musical Rondeau* to *POETRY*, the following judgment: “In this *transference*, “an analogous *identification* and *diversification* should be “felt in the *THOUGHT*, and *marked* in the *RECITATION*. “The words “*TRUE*,” “*STRONG*,” “*WELL*,” “*BOUND*,” “in the specimen, each presenting itself *twice* to the *eye*, “should, notwithstanding, be contemplated by the *mind*, “and enunciated by the *oral organs*, each, as an *UNIT*; “the conception, and the voice, passing from the first to “the second occurrence with versatility, and ON THE IN- “*STANT*. Thus, the recollection of it, as *CLOSE*, will be “lost in its *transit*; or rather *merged* in its new character, “as *RETURN*; upon the principle of the modern *POLACCA*, “or ancient *AMPHIBRACHIC*.”...Had this arbiter presented himself in person, and offered illustration, it is possible some idea might have been made out of his meaning, such as it is, or may be. At present, the thought appears unappreciable, and the phraseology approaches to a jargon.



As to the levity itself, I think it may be said with truth, that its composition must have cost more <sup>1</sup> labour than it is ever likely to pay. It holds of the Italian school; has in it more of sound than sense; and the little sense it has is not much helped forward by the sound; notwithstanding the accelerating power of the letter *l*,<sup>2</sup> which he has *here* employed upon the principles of his masters, although with too much profusion, and scarcely with any success. Enough of the letter *l*; Representative poetry; and Poetical Rondeaux.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See particularly the last Close and Return.

<sup>2</sup> Certain other letters are supposed, by the critics alluded to, to be endowed with an opposite power. The letter *V* is conceived to be of that order, and as such employed by Virgil in that line of singular alliteration, *ÆN.* vi. 834,

“*Neu Patriae Validas in Viscera Vertite Vires!*”

<sup>3</sup> [The Editor agrees in opinion with the Author of the *CRITICISM*, in his stricture upon the Pretensions to Novelty, of the Idea, held out in the letter from which the above extract is given, and on the illustration and management of it, in the piece annexed as a specimen. Verses, under different titles, are to be found, in all lan-

## XXIII.

In the twenty-third stanza, the last of the four formerly mentioned, is held out a sentiment which criticism is willing to praise, till, collecting her ideas, she remembers having bestowed praise on its contrary. Does the "some fond breast," do the "some pious drops," alluded to, contribute to take from the bitterness of death, and smooth the passage to the world of spirits? So says Gray. But

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guages, proceeding, in different degrees, and some of them whimsically enough, upon that idea. The subjoined Trifle is formed, in part, upon it; though all the resources alluded to, those particularly of a more technical kind, are not called in to contribute to the intended effect. It is to be found clothed with an highly elegant and appropriate Melody<sup>1</sup> by that great master of the school of Simplicity, the late Mr JACKSON, of Exeter; whose truly classical compositions will long be relished by those who seek for a temperate and quiet enjoyment in the meeker and more gentle effusions of Musical Expression,

<sup>1</sup> OPERA XVI. Song. 8.

what says Parnel,<sup>1</sup> in a case pretty similar? *Audi alteram partem* :

Nor can the parted body *know*,  
Nor needs the soul, these forms of woe.

dictated by correct discrimination, and regulated by  
the chastest Taste. *His Saltem accumulem Donis....!*]

SOBER ANACREONTICK.

I.

If the watchful eye of CARE  
Could out-watch DEATH, or TROUBLE SCARE,....  
If Thought could think Mishap away,  
Then 'TWERE FOLLY TO BE GAY.

II.

If the briny streams that flow  
Could exhaust the springs of woe,  
Then to weep were wisdom sure :  
Though harsh the physic, sweet the cure !

III.

If the sigh that rends the heart  
Could force a way for pain to part,  
Then I'd sigh, and vent my grief ;  
And bless the pang that brought relief !

IV.

If the anguish-prompted moan  
Could charm me back the bliss that's flown,  
The wail of woe should woe destroy,  
And mourn the sorrow into joy !

V.

If, when disasters rudely press,  
To sink were to elude distress,  
Sweet Siren, HOPE, I'd fly thy snare,  
And, wistful, woo the hag DESPAIR !

VI.

But, if on Evil fix'd to dwell  
Serves but the sum of ill to swell . . .  
If bodeful musings, grief-wrung tears,  
But fret our wounds—encrease our fears....

VII.

Unbend we, quick, the brow of Care ;  
And, while the destined load we bear,  
Light of heart, let's urge our way :  
IT IS WISDOM TO BE GAY !

<sup>1</sup> Night-Piece.

And Thomson ?

—— How many stand  
Around the death-bed of their dearest friends,  
And point the parting anguish !

Sterne too, whose dissipation was too short-lived, completely to destroy in him the seeds of sensibility and nature, has described, in a book of which perhaps one fifth part is worth reading, the sympathies of surrounding friends, as constituting the acutest part of a dying man's anguish. Having recorded his wish to die in an inn (a species of death for which there will be few competitors,) he proceeds thus : " At home,—I know " it,—the concern of my friends, and the " last services of wiping my brow, and " smoothing my pillow, which the quivering hand of pale Affection shall pay " me, will so crucify my soul, that I shall

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! Winter.



“ die of a distemper which my physician  
“ is not aware of.”

Amongst Doctors who thus disagree, who shall settle the dispute? To a mind given to shift its views, and to sensibilities not yet properly made up, both aspects of the fact, and both impressions of the sentiment, offer themselves in turn; and both are in turn approved. Of this vicissitude of feeling, no man is without his share. As the frame of the mind alters, so alter its likings, and its prepossession in favour of a sentiment, or its opposite. Of sentiments exclusively just, the catalogue would be but small. Relative truth is all we have a title to expect in the department of taste; of which, as no standard exists, it is vain to suppose any standard should be found. Scepticism, dangerous in philosophy, and impious in religion, urges a reasonable plea for admission into the court of criticism; of whose decisions she may tem-

per the severity, and diminish the self-importance.

With these mutually contradictory sentiments (to which the late Mr Savage gave the name of *ambidextrous*,<sup>\*</sup> and of which he had made large collections from the body of English poetry that then existed,)—sentiments to which the mind makes alternate love, as the antiquary bestows his admiration, now on the Head of the medal, and now on the Reverse, the writings of all authors of fancy are replete. We recognise them, at times contradicting each other, and at times contradicting themselves. The language of the

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<sup>\*</sup> The appropriation of the word is contrary to analogy. *Colliding* would have been more proper. On the occasions alluded to, it is the *mind* that is ambidextrous; not the *sentiments*. Savage, whose fancy led him to form more projects than his means allowed him to execute, seems to have intended some work upon this subject. But to render the design complete, his Collections, of which I retain an indistinct idea, should have taken in prose-writers as well as poets, and other languages as well as the English.

Leasowes is, that to the passionate lover,  
the wonted haunts of the beloved object  
give gratification, when from these haunts  
she is absent.

They tell me, my favourite maid,  
The pride of that valley, is gone :  
Alas ! where with her I have strayed,  
I could wander with pleasure, alone.<sup>1</sup>

The image is one that pleases for the  
time : but, reflected from the lakes of  
Hagley, which is only a few miles off, it  
meets the eye with its form inverted,  
and yet it pleases still.

The shades of Hagley now have lost their boast,—  
How, in the world, to me a desert grown,  
Abandoned and alone,  
Without my sweet companion, can I live ?<sup>2</sup>

There are frames of mind that suit ei-  
ther view. It is not in poetry as in logic.

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<sup>1</sup> Shenstone. Absence.

<sup>2</sup> Littleton. Monody.

Here two contradictories may dwell together, each of equal authority with its opposite.

Though poetry may be justifiable in presenting us with opposite views, each of which may be true for the time, yet she ought to beware, when she is dealing out her *universals*, that she offer us not a relative in place of an absolute truth. It is in this view that Gray is censurable in the present instance. That the sympathies of friends give ease to a dying man, may be, in general, as just a sentiment as that they give him pain; that they soften his anguish, as that they point it: but, here, the enunciation is didactic. The poet speaks in no character, and to no particular class, but brings forth the sentiment in the form of a position; and, considered as a position, it is not true.

The third line of the stanza contains



an hyperbole, which is out-hyperboled in the fourth :

Even from the grave the voice of Nature cries :  
Even in our ashes live their wonted fires.

—a position at which Experience revolts, Credulity hesitates, and even Fancy stares. He who can bring himself to believe, that he has heard the voice of Nature crying from the grave of a dead man, is in train to assent, in time, to the proposition, that “ even in our ashes live their wonted fires :” though Friendship should caution him to stop short, and Pleasantry suggest to him that surface-views are oft delusive ; and that he may find himself, on this occasion, if he goes farther on, *incedere per IGNES suppositos cineri DOLOSO*. But I am ashamed of the expenditure of precious time, incurred by the examination of a proposition contrary to all truth, abstract or poetical ; which Madness cannot shape itself to

the conviction of; nor elongations, more than Pindaric, bring imagination in contact with, even for a moment.

What makes this conceit (if by the name conceit may be called that which cannot be conceived) the more unpardonable in Gray is, that, (by a process of judgment the reverse of that formerly commemorated, with regard to the closing line of a stanza in his Ode on Spring) he introduced the line, in which it is conveyed, in place of another; and as an improvement of the original thought. The stanza, in its first state, concluded with this line,

“Awake and faithful to her wonted fires;”

which, if we chasten still farther, upon the suggestion of Mr Mason, into

Awake and faithful to her *first desires*;

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! Mason.

we shall then, instead of two hyperboles, have only one, lengthened by the addition of a trail. I think Mason has informed us, that he advised him to alter the line. But Gray could not afford to want it: for here, it is probable, he once intended to conclude the Elegy; and this mode of "twirling off the thought into an apophthegm," he thought the most imposing he was likely to find.

Gray has, in a note on this line, endeavoured to justify the thought by a reference to a passage in Petrarch. But no authority can give dignity to nonsense, or transmute false taste into true. As to the writings of Petrarch, it may be allowed that, in them, as in most of the Italian poetry, many instances of conceit occur. Yet more have been fancied than found. A poet who possesses this vein in himself, imagines that he meets with it wherever he goes. Thoughts apparelled in the simplest garb, appear to

him drest out in point. The ideas, that pass in review before him, partake of the colour of his mind ; and his fancy, like Shakespear's green-eyed monster, "makes the food it feeds on." Ovid abounds in conceits, and quaintnesses ; but the eyes of Cowley multiplied them, as they did those of Petrarch, to infinity.

After reference thus soberly made to the authority of Petrarch, Curiosity will, no doubt, prick up his ears when he is told, that the passage, quoted from that poet, contains not the sentiment in question. Mason, whose taste was too good to make him admit the authority of Petrarch in defence of an unnatural thought, seems not, however, to have doubted that the thought was really Petrarch's. And, indeed, if, of the sonnet referred to, the three lines quoted by Gray be taken, detached from the rest, they may, though somewhat awkwardly, be forced into the



expression of that thought. Taken along with the context, and in connection with its design, the wildness of the idea vanishes, and propriety and nature invest it.

The poet is complaining of the hopelessness of his love.\* “The flame I cherish,” says he, “how intense! yet how unrewarded! and even unperceived! unperceived by her, whom alone I wish to recognise it, though marked by all besides! Ah, distrustful fair-one! in whom much beauty is mixed with little faith, look at my love-lorn eye, and doubt my passion, if you can. No, you cannot, you do not, doubt it; but my luckless star hardens your heart against my ardent love. Yet not altogether unrewarded shall be my passion, although unrewarded by you. The tune-

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\* Petr. Son. 170.

“ful homage, which you regard not, shall  
 “gain me immortal fame. The flame,  
 “which you repay not with kindred  
 “flame, shall spread its contagion over  
 “many hearts. As a living principle, it  
 “shall pervade my verse. I see it, in  
 “Fancy’s eye, shooting its sparks into  
 “future ages; and (*when the two fair  
 “orbs that inspired it are closed, and the  
 “tongue that sung their praises is cold*)  
 “.... SETTING THE WORLD ON FIRE!”

Versified thus :

Ah ! how within me glows the subtle flame !  
 To all but one fair infidel confess’d.  
 She, only dear, supreme in worth and fame,  
 She only, doubts her empire in my breast :  
 Thou rich in beauty !—yet, in faith how poor !  
 Speaks not my fever’d eye the wasting grief ?  
 —But for my luckless star, ere now, full sure,  
 Some drops from Pity’s fount had brought relief.  
 Yet glows not, meedless quite, the warm desire ;—  
 But, when our dust has filled the fatal urn,  
 Long, in my verse, shall live the genial fire,  
 Which warm’d thy bosom cold to no return.—  
 Wide shall its sparks the kindred flame inspire ;  
 And other Lauras melt ;—and other Petrarchs mourn !

So much for this celebrated sentiment,

in the Elegy written in a Country Church-yard ; a sentiment which it is heresy not to support, and sluggishness not to feel : and so much for the passage of Petrarch, on which Gray supposed he had built it. If \* one line, in which there is a little of point, be excepted, the sonnet of which it makes the close, is as simple as ever was sung. A tuneful lover consoles himself for the hardness of his mistress's heart, by anticipating the enthusiasm with which posterity will read the verses, in which he has sung her praise. Here is no voice of Nature crying from the grave of the dead ; here are no inurned ashes glowing with posthumous fires. It is not the ashes of Petrarch and Laura that glow, but posterity that glows, when Petrarch and Laura are no more.<sup>2</sup>

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\* " *Fredda una lingua, et due begli occhi chiusi.*"

<sup>2</sup> I subjoin the Sonnet at length, as Petrarch gave it. I observe CASTELVETRO has explained the passage as the

On this sonnet of Petrarch, mishap seems to have been entailed. Cowley, to whom Petrarch was an inexhaustible mine, struck upon it, in one of his days of digging. He knew it, by its general appearance, to be ore, and set himself accordingly to smelt it; but so clumsily did he perform the operation, and so

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author of the Criticism apprehends it. "*Che quos*;" in reference to "*mille*." The misconception of this reference, and an inattention to the *absolute* construction, in the verse, "*Fredda una lingua, e duo begli occhi chiusi*," seem to have given rise to the English poet's mistake.—EDITOR.

LASSO, Ch' i' ardo; ed altri non mel crede:  
 Sì crede ogni uom, se non sola colei  
 Ch' è sovr' ogni altra, e ch' i' soa vorrai:  
 Ella non pav che'l creda, e sì sel vede:  
 Infinita bellezza, e poca fede,  
 Non vedete voi'l cor negli occhi miei?  
 Se non fosse mia stella, i' pur devrei  
 Al fonte di pietà trovar mercede.  
 Quest' arder mio, di che vi cal sì poco,  
 E i vostri onori in mie rime diffusi  
 Ne porian' infiammar fors' ancor mille:  
 Ch' i' veggio nel pensier, dolce mio foco,  
 Fredda una lingua, e duo begli occhi chiusi.  
 Rimaner dopo noi pien' di faville.



much heterogeneous metal did he suffer to run into it, that the most skilled assayers will scarcely know to what specimen to refer it. It is wrought up into one of the pieces of *The Mistress*, and is here given to the reader, both as being a curiosity in itself, and as illustrating the part of Cowley's poetical character, hinted in these strictures on Gray, and stated, elsewhere, at length.

#### HER UNBELIEF.

##### I.

'Tis a strange kind of unbelief in you,  
That you your vict'ries should not spy :  
Vict'ries begotten by your eye.—  
That your bright beams, as those of comets do,  
Should kill ; but not know how, or who.

##### II.

That, truly, you my idol may appear,  
Whilst all the people smell, and see,  
The od'rous flames I offer thee,  
Thou sitt'st, and do'st not see, nor smell, nor hear,  
Thy constant, zealous, worshipper!

## III.

They see't too well, who at my fires repine ;  
 Nay, th' unconcern'd themselves do prove  
 Quick-ey'd enough to spy my love.  
 Nor does the cause in thy face clearer shine,  
 Than the effect appears in mine.

## IV.

Fair infidel ! by what unjust decree,  
 Must I, who, with such restless care,  
 Would make this truth to thee appear,—  
 Must I, who preach, and pray for't, be  
 Damn'd, by thy incredulity ?

## V.

I, by thy unbelief, am, guiltless, slain :  
 O have but faith ; and then, that you  
 That faith may know for to be true,  
 It shall itself b' a miracle maintain ;  
 And raise me from the dead again.—&c.

What an heterogeneous mass is here !  
 what a chaos of jarring elements ! *Fri-*  
*gida pugnancia calidis, humentia siccis !*  
 This strange mistress is, first, an infidel ;  
 then she is a gainer of battles ; which  
 battles are begot ; and their father is  
 her eye. That eye, however, is a blind

one ; as blind as a comet. Then she grows into the idol Baal ; and is not only blind but deaf ; and moreover without the sense of smelling : but that does not hinder her face from shining. Next she is transformed into Cause ; and her lover into Effect : after which she becomes an infidel again ; and her lover is transformed into a priest ; in which character he both preaches and prays, to convert her ; but all to no purpose :—for, after having run the risk of damnation, he is actually made to suffer death. Yet that does not damp his zeal. He is resolved to make one trial more ; and, finding all other arguments fail, proposes the powerful one of miracles ; undertaking, if she will first believe on trust, to rise, himself, from the dead, in order to confirm her faith !—Such is the process in this piece ; a process, in the contemplation of which Reason feels herself humbled ; and Fancy, put to shame ; whilst Religion reclaims, indig-

nant that her mysteries should suffer profanation, by such absurd and wanton allusions.

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What now remains of the Elegy, partakes of the nature of an After-piece. In his "Elegy to the Memory of an Unfortunate Lady," the vanity of Pope had tempted him to introduce himself. For this he had some plausible colour; as with this lady (who seems to have been more foolish than unfortunate, and to discover whose family, and private history, curiosity has laboured in vain) he had, or thought it creditable to be thought to have had, some connection, in the way of friendship or love. The example of Pope has, in this instance, been imitated by Gray, who had not the same motive to inspire the design, nor the same ability to regulate its execution. In the



abruptness of the introduction of their own affairs, and the want of art in engrafting them on the general design, there is a considerable similarity. The little that Pope had to say of himself, he thought likely to come best from his own mouth. Gray, who has not said much more of himself, has put what is to be said in the mouth of another. Pope has alluded to his own death ; but Gray, advancing a step farther, has proceeded to the circumstances of his burial, and even given us the epitaph on his stone. Of this After-piece, rather adhering to the Elegy than uniting with it, criticism thinks it unnecessary that the examination should be minute or long.

## XXIV.

That a "kindred spirit" should be more interested in the fate of the writer, than one of a different temperament, is natural; but how this kindred spirit should, in his lonely contemplations, stumble into the same Church-yard in which this Elegy was written, we search in vain for a probable account. One is tempted to suppose Gray to have sometimes figured this Elegy as fixed up in the Country Church-yard, as well as originally penned in it. But this only leads us from one incongruity, to land us immediately in another. Why does the kindred spirit enquire the fate of him, whose fate is commemorated in the Elegy that made him originally known? as is also the very enquiry he is here supposed to make. But I hasten from this part of the piece, afraid of being invol-

ved in its entanglements, and apprehensive of the confusion of ideas that it seems to threaten to him who shall dwell on it long.

That Gray, in a work so serious, should have intended to amuse himself, or his reader, with picturing the talkativeness of the rustic character, or the excursive-ness of narrative age, I am not willing to believe. But certain it is, that the "hoary-headed swain" tells the "kindred spirit" more than was asked of him; and, instead of simply relating the fate of the writer, enters somewhat diffusely into his character. Here, again, the manners are violated; and the rustic is made to tell his tale, in language the most chaste and polished, and in style the most poetical, that the Elegy contains. Gray seems, by a kind of perverseness of application, to have finished off this passage with all the care of which he was master; and to have given

it out of his hand with a consciousness of success, that brings back to memory the self-complacency of Bayes, after one of his most ranting passages, in which he thinks he has brought out every excellence to which even his powers were adequate—"That is as well as I can do."

That Gray should have formed a wish to exert himself with more than ordinary earnestness on a subject so near to him, is not to be wondered at. But he forgets that the enthusiasm and fancy, which might be allowable in a description of his character, when that description came from himself, are inadmissible in the mouth of another, and that other a stranger, and a clown. But this is one of the most strongly marked peculiarities of his poetical temperament. He is always more attentive to the grandeur and magnificence of his building, than to the propriety of its site. He is ever



meditating a great structure; taking it for granted, that it may stand in all places alike. From all quarters he fatigues himself in collecting ponderous and bulky materials, which he encourages himself to pile up, till they shall have reached the Empyreum; without considering the incongruities in the design, or the obstacles that may ruin its execution: like the commemorated projectors of a tower that was to reach to heaven, which they began to build in a plain, and without considering that the very laws of matter, on which the operation of building proceeds, entailed impracticability. The epithet φιλοπονιωτατος, bestowed by an ancient critic<sup>1</sup> on Euripides, may, with propriety, be transferred to Gray; as may also the critic's description of the strained and laboured elevation of

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<sup>1</sup> Longin. de Sublim.

that poet's tragical imagery, in which he is ludicrously compared to Homer's Lion, "lashing his hips with his tail; and forcing himself forward to fight."

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XXV. XXVI. XXVII. XXVIII. XXIX.

Nor is much of the poet's character unfolded by the rustic; though many words are used. "That he was a man  
"given to musing; that he loved to  
"meet the sun in the morning, and to  
"repose in the shade at noon; that he  
"walked by the side of a wood, and  
"lounged on the bank of a brook; and  
"that, after having been two days missing, he was decently buried, on the  
"third, at the foot of an old thorn"—is all that the hoary-headed swain can say about him: for the rest he refers to the Epitaph, or, as he calls it, the Lay, en-

graved upon his tombstone; and which lay, from the kindred spirit's knowing him by this Elegy, he doubts not he is qualified to read. Here is little gratification to curiosity: and, as to the original question about his fate, we are left almost as much in the dark as before. That he is now dead and buried, is all of his fate we know: though the shortness of the interval between his burial, and the time when he was last seen, with his loitering so much by the side of the water, furnishes, in the case of so melancholy a man, matter for further conjecture, and wakes suspicion of suicide.

Of the three-stanza'd Epitaph, which the rustic terms a Lay, the supplemental information is not great. "That he  
" was poor, obscure, pensive, not un-  
" learned, sympathising, and blessed with  
" a friend (I suppose of his own sex) with

“ something more that might be mentioned, were it not needless to go deep “ into the character of a dead man”— is all the information we draw from it ; information not momentous enough to make us regret the want of more.

The manner in which the character is “ made out,” though in particular instances fortunate, is not without faults. The hastiness of his steps in mounting “ the upland lawn,” and the purpose for which he mounts it, are circumstances more associable with the Allegro character, than with the Penseroso. So thought the great discriminator of these characters. His man of cheerfulness is eager to observe the glory of the rising sun ; his pensive man’s morning is not bright ; but <sup>1</sup> “ kerchief’d in a comely cloud.” So also Thomson, to whose au-

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<sup>1</sup> Milton, Penseroso.



thority, on most occasions, he has not scorned to pay some regard :

As, through the falling glooms,  
Pensive I stray ; or, with the rising dawn,  
On Fancy's eagle wing excursive soar.\*

In Thomson these actions belong to two descriptions of character. Gray has wrought both into one. If the "steps" must be "hasty," the operation of brushing the dew from the grass will not help him to mend his pace; it is an action tending rather to impede accelerated motion, than to promote it.

"Chance," in the twenty-fifth stanza, used adverbially, though justified by a Latin idiom, is rebutting to an English ear. But the poet was in distress. The necessity of his situation called for the idea twice, within the compass of three lines. A word of two syllables brought

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\* Summer.

him relief in the one case ; and a word of one syllable in the other. He could not use "haply" twice. "Lonely contemplation," is not well said. Who is there that goes into company to contemplate ? One is surprised to see a writer, who deals in "trembling hope," "living ashes," "little great," put up so contentedly with "solemn stillness," "lonely contemplation," and "flowers that blow." Gray, speaking of water, has used "ambient tide." He that has dipt much in "ambient tide," will soon emerge to "ambient air:" then we shall find him among "feathered songsters;" a set of company rarely now to be met with even in Poetry's horn-book.

"His poring on the brook," is characteristic. But his stretching himself at the foot of a beech, is no more than the lounging Tityrus had done before him. Tityrus' beech is a spreading one, as what beech is not ? Of Gray's beech it

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is left to be supposed that it spreads ; but we are expressly told that it nods ; and that it “ wreathes its old fantastic roots high.” What is meant by a tree wreathing its roots high ? Vegetation seems here inverted, and age endowed with the pliancy of youth.

Theory can, in no other way, account for the strange form in which this beech appears, than by supposing it to have been an image, not of fancy, but of fact. A mind strongly irritable upon the approximation of external forms, treasures up the grotesque images both of living and still nature, as they present themselves, and brings them forth, afterwards, as the effects of inspiration. Gray had casually come in the way of some *lusus naturæ* of the beech tribe, of whose fantastic form the outline had continued upon his mind, and imprest his fancy with a vivid picture. Of Gray’s inspirations, it is known, that many derived

their origin from casual impressions, made on the organs of sense. The sight of the Welch harper, Parry,<sup>1</sup> and the rapture he felt at his execution, animated him to the finishing his "Bard," after it had lain by, for two years, hopeless: and the "loose beard" and "hoary hair streaming to the wind," with which he has invested his tuneful Cambrian, were derived from a representation, by Raphael, of the Supreme Being, in the vision of Ezekiel.<sup>2</sup>

The beech seems literally to have been Gray's "favourite tree;" and, in the contemplation of it, in all its varieties, he seems to have passed many poetical hours. In the year 1737, he met with beeches, in grounds belonging to his uncle, of so singular a character, that I am willing to indulge the reader with

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<sup>1</sup> Mason.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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The thorn in Glastonbury Church-yard is known to have suggested to Gray, in the Elegy, the idea of that thorn, under which he fancies himself as buried. What particular beech he had in his eye, there is now no means of knowing. Chronology forbids us to suppose it to have been the beech which he found in the Highlands of Scotland, and which, to the astonishment of less fortunate travellers, he reports, upon his own mensuration, to have been upwards of sixteen feet in the girth, and no less than eighty feet high.\*

Why the pensive man should lie rather under the shade of a beech, than under any other shady tree, save Gray's predilection for the beech, no reason can be assigned. In a situation nearly simi-

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state, until they were again thawed into vocality, by the return of the warm season!

\* Mason.



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him, who has already condemned himself. For the discontinuance of it in the after-editions, Mason has assigned this cause, that it was thought by its author to be awkwardly parenthetical. But there were other reasons that rendered it expedient that it should be suffered to slip out quietly. The same images, delineated, and assembled, nearly in the same manner, are to be found in some of Collins' Pieces, published about 1746. I am aware that to fix imitation upon Gray, is not to bestow originality upon Collins. Some of Collins' images can be traced to Pope; and some of Pope's, as well as Collins', to ages of high antiquity. "By foreign hands thy dying eyes were closed," &c. make part of the wailings of Electra in Sophocles, for the supposed death of Orestes: "The turf lying light on the breast," (to which a ludicrous contrast is on record) standing now so high in the list of

elegiac common places, occurs in the *Alcestis* of Euripedes ; and Homer has made his Mountain Nymphs (the Fays of those times) plant elms, since supplanted by flowers, around Eetion's grave. Property in fancy is like other property. Priority of appropriation must found the original right ; and of that priority our investigation must determine with the record.

Of the writers to whom Gray has done homage for his tenure, I think Pope is not one. Let it not, however, be imagined, that, though nothing is acknowledged, nothing is owing. The "Elegy to the Memory of an unfortunate Lady," has given to the "Elegy written in a Country Church-yard," many things both in the way of sentiment and design.

The "storied urn" of Gray, is the "weeping Loves" of Pope ; and "animated bust," is only an obscure expres-

sion for Pope's "polished marble emulating the face."

"What, though no sacred earth allow thee room,  
"Nor hallowed dirge be mutter'd o'er thy tomb?"

has furnished the perhaps improved idea expressed in

....Though mem'ry o'er their tomb no trophies raise,  
Where, thro' the long-drawn aisle and fretted vault,  
The pealing anthem swells the note of praise.

That funeral honours, however scrupulously paid, cannot "back from its mansion call the fleeting breath," is also to be found in Pope, though stated in a different way :

So, peaceful, rests without a stone, a name,  
What once had beauty, titles, wealth, and fame ;—  
A heap of dust alone remains of thee :  
'Tis all thou art ; and all the proud shall be !

"The morn bestowing her earliest tears ;"  
(poetical phraseology for dew) "the first roses of the year blowing," &c. are

images which both Collins and Gray thought worth gathering.

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Here Criticism is content to stop; congratulating herself on the termination of a labour irksome, but not overwhelming; invidious, but not void of use. If she has descended into too minute an examination, it has not been with a view to darken counsel, but to furnish light. Of fine writing, the perfection is not so well promoted by abstract canons, as by individual illustrations; by the inculcating what should be written, as by the examination of what has been written. The detection of particular blemishes is more productive of good than the display of general perfection. There is a common-weal in taste, as well as in government. Minute and characteristical exhibitions, of errors as well as of excellence, are necessary for



improvement, in both. *Inde tibi, tuæque REIPUBLICÆ, quod imitere, capias ; inde fædum INCEPTU, fædum EXITU, quod vites.* In the execution of this necessary task, Criticism finds herself engaged in much labour, and subjected to much self-denial : impeded by prejudice, and deterred by misconstruction. But the labour is honourable ; and the end useful. She is content to forget the hardships she has suffered ; and solace herself with the view of the good she has done.

In examining the Elegy written in a Country Church-yard, she has found much room for censure, and some room for praise. The Piece has been over-rated ; and many serious persons, who meditate on death from a sense of duty, consider Conscience as concerned in their finding this Meditation perfect. Of perfections no doubt it contains some ; but it contains blemishes too ; and, if

Criticism grant it nothing but its merit, what will be its praise?

To rate that merit precisely, is perhaps not easy: but, where the premises are, the conclusion may be found. Those who are resolved to fortify themselves in the feeling which they have encouraged themselves to entertain of its perfections, may find many strong positions, in which they may maintain themselves, without immediate danger of being forced. The subject is serious; the views interesting; the thoughts tender; the versification, in general, smooth; the language not unsuitable. The flights are sometimes bold; often catching; and the execution often striking; and sometimes natural. But what, of all things, is likely to ensure this performance a lasting and general interest is, that it abounds with images which find a mirror in every mind, and with sentiments to which every bosom returns an echo.

Where so many beauties are, room may be afforded for faults : of these, Criticism has not concealed what came in her way ; and, to such as may urge her to a farther search, she will content herself with tendering, concerning the Elegy, the admonition which its writer has tendered concerning himself :

NO FARTHER SEEK ITS MERITS TO DISCLOSE,  
NOR DRAW ITS FRAILTIES FROM THEIR DREAD  
ABODE.....

FINIS.

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